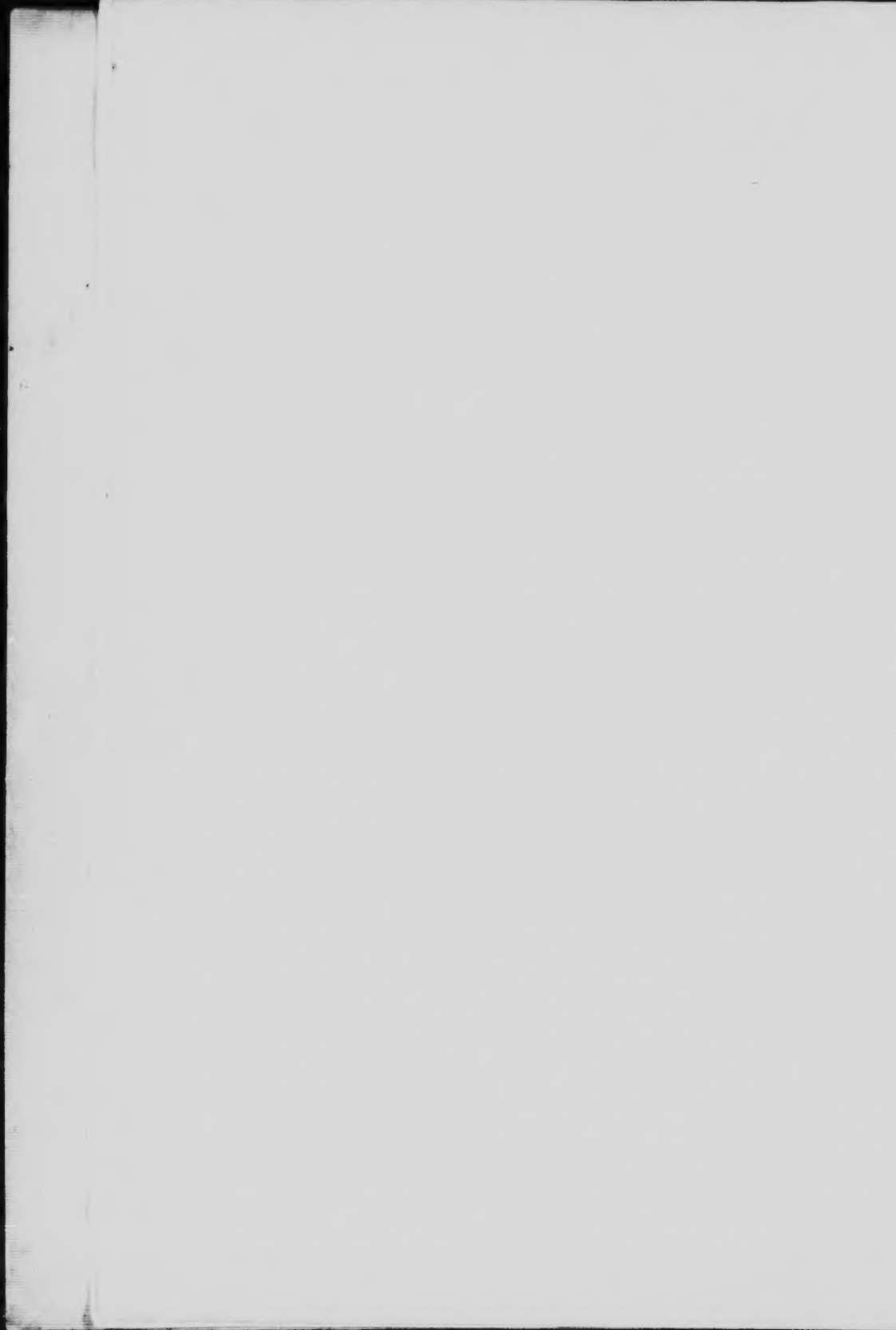


THE MASTER OF MERLAINS



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THE MASTER OF MERLAINS

BY
DAVID WHITELOW

AUTHOR OF

"THE LITTLE HOUR OF PETER WELLS," "A CASTLE IN BOHEMIA,"
"THE MYSTERY OF ENID DEILAINS," ETC.

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WILKIE BARD

WITH MANY A PLEASANT MEMORY



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THE MASTER OF MERLAINS

THE PROLOGUE

THERE were pictures in the fire for the Countess du Barry upon the night of the tenth of August in the year seventeen hundred and ninety-two.

Strange, indeed, to speak of fires in August, but there are in life chills other than those of winter, chills that come with the years to deaden the brain and creep about the heart. All day Madame la Comtesse had been cold, for all that the sun had shone with such splendour, rioting among the glories of the gardens and making of the shrubbery walks dim retreats of gold-flecked shade. From the upper lawns of the gardens of the Château of Louveciennes the woman had, during those burning hours, looked often towards Paris, gazing over the topmost branches of Saint Germain and across the winding silver of the Seine to the towers and spires of the city in which she had known happiness and through whose streets she had passed in all the glory and pageantry of her triumphs.

And there had been sorrow and sadness in her eyes as she had looked, in those eyes whose laughter

and deviltry had bewitched the fifteenth Louis and brought the great gay world of Versailles to her feet. But the fifteenth Louis had been sleeping these many years, let us hope peacefully, in the dim vault of the Capets in the Abbey of Saint Denis, and the partner of his pleasures was left to gaze, upon this August night, into the fire that she had ordered to be lighted in the great dining-room of her Château of Louveciennes. . . .

That cavern of dull red between the black banks of coal became to her a cloister, the cloister of the Convent of Saint Aure, where the graceful figure of a nun bends over a little girl, soothing away with gentle hands and comforting word some infant sorrow. A pretty child it is, in black woollen hood and gown of white serge, with tear-washed eyes that look out with pathetic sweetness upon the world, like drenched violets in a wood at evening. . . .

A coal falls upon the hearth. Huge shadows arise and dance upon the tapestried walls, flames leap in the mirrors and play strange antics among the furniture and hangings and in the hair of the woman who bends over the fire.

The sombre walls of coal are falling in, and now, among the masses, she sees a room, the lofty bed-chamber of the Palace of Versailles where, upon the great canopied couch, Louis the Well-beloved lies stricken to death by his foul malady. Into the picture there glide figures—courtiers, cardinals, physicians—they float like phantoms about the

death-bed of the monarch who had outlived the love and devotion of his people. . . .

The dying coals huddle together.

And now there is another picture, a gambling house in the Rue Bourbon. The little maid of the Convent of Saint Aure is here again, budding now into sweet womanhood, the serge gown changed into silks and satins, the virginal hood into an erection of powdered hair, the coarse sandals laid aside for tiny high-heeled slippers of blue brocade. There are other women in the candle-lit room, *filles galantes* like herself, and in the background, the dim figure of a man, the *roué* of Levignac, who is to have so sinister and far-reaching an influence upon. . . .

The Countess du Barry rises from her chair with a little shudder—perhaps such pictures do not please her. She stands for a moment, one shapely hand resting upon the lapis lazuli of the mantel-piece, looking into the dying embers.

The Countess is, in this fiftieth year of her life, still beautiful. The fears and the anxieties of the last few months have done little to change the oval of that perfect face; the lashes that shade the violet eyes are long and full as ever; the little mole, nature's own beauty patch, upon the rounded cheek, as fascinating as in the days when her word had power to sway the destinies of empires. The hair that can be best described as having the colour of the ashes of a golden fire has defied the snows of years. Small wonder that so fine a judge of beauty

as the Duc de Cossé-Brissac had found happiness in the legacy of his king.

The woman turns from the fire and allows her eyes to roam about the great room. Zamor, the Hindoo servant, has, before retiring, lighted the tapers in the branched candelabra that make of the table upon which it stands an oasis of radiance in a desert of gloom. Time had been when this room had glowed with the light of a thousand candles, when around the table had clustered the greatest of France behind whose chairs had hovered, soft-footed, the servants in the du Barry livery of red and blue.

The figure of the Countess stiffens and there is fear in the eyes that turn towards the brocaded curtains that shroud the long windows . . . fear and a certain expectancy. Jeanne du Barry knows now that something over which she had no control has kept her from her bed, gazing and seeing pictures in the fire and waiting . . . waiting for something that was foreordained. Destiny is in the air this night, ghosts of the past are all about her, pale phantoms of a former glory returned, perhaps, to witness . . . what? The woman gives a little laugh, and walking to the window draws aside the heavy drapery.

At first she does not recognize the white blur that is but a few inches beyond the glass. Had she not just told herself that there were ghosts that night in Louveciennes? And then, peering closely,

the woman sees that it is a face, a white face in which two eyes burn beneath a stained bandage that has been twisted tightly about the brows. The du Barry gives a little laugh . . . of course this is one of de Brissac's aides-de-camp, young Jules Gressier of the regiment of the *Petits Pères*. No ghost, but a sturdy, laughter-loving lieutenant of the *Petits Pères*. . . .

At the recognition the woman raises a hand to the latch of the window then, remembering that, following a certain affair of the past month when a band of desperadoes from Paris, taking advantage of the lawless times, had relieved her of a large proportion of her jewels, new locks had been affixed to all the windows of the château, fastenings that she could not reach, she leans forward and makes a sign to Gressier that he should go round and await her at the door of the pavilion. She remembers that she has, in her reticule, the key to the sliding doors that give upon the terrace.

Letting the curtains fall back, the woman takes the candelabra from the table and passes from the room. Across the tiled vestibule she walks, and into the long passage that leads to the orangery and the new pavilion that had of late years been added to the château. A little wind has found its way into the passage, and it fans the flames of the tapers so that the shepherds and shepherdesses painted by Briard upon the ceiling appear to take to themselves life, and dance to the woman's passing. The

huge chandelier with its thousand lustres is swathed in linen, for, since the arrest of Monsieur le Duc there had been little gaiety in Louveciennes. The ghosts are here also, they come from dim corners, from behind gilded chairs and commodes, they stare and gibber down from the shadows of the musicians' gallery . . . phantoms from a world of phantoms come again to see what the old world is up to upon this tenth day of August in the year One of this crazy and new-fangled Republic.

The Countess turns the key, and placing the candelabra upon an oval table that stands by the door, steps out on to the wide terrace and leans out over the stone balustrade. Gressier would have to make a *détour* to reach the pavilion, but yet there should be some sound ere this to herald his approach.

Below, the gardens lie grey—green and black under the cold light of the newly risen moon. Faintly, across the woods, the Seine can be seen winding sinuously on its way to that distant city whose lights are painting the skies with bronze. There is a gentle wind coming from the west, a soft caressing wind that stirs the foliage in the shrubberies and brings to the woman upon the terrace the scents from the dew-drenched rosery.

She stands motionless. No sound comes to her save the twittering of insects in the bushes, and, once, the distant hoot of an owl. Nothing breaks the monotony save where, here and there, a statue or terminal upon the lawn shows greyly. They

take their places in the army of ghosts, and set the Countess thinking of the white wimples and gowns of the Bernardine Sisters at the Abbey of Pont-aux-Dames to which she had been banished at the death of Louis the Fifteenth. . . . Then there comes to her the cautious tread of feet upon gravel. She leans further out from the terrace.

"Is that you, Monsieur Gressier?"

The aide-de-camp comes from one of the alleyways of the shrubbery into the light that streams from the door of the pavilion, and, seeing him clearly, the Countess gives a little cry. She knows now why the young lieutenant of the *Petits Pères* has been so long upon his way. The left leg drags painfully as he walks, and the youthful face, as the light from the candles falls upon it, shines like a waxen mask. It is plain to see that pluck—and pluck alone—has kept Jules Gressier from falling by the way.

The woman leans down from the low balcony and with gentle hand assists the young aide up the two or three shallow steps, and half supports, half leads, him through the dim corridors and into the dining-hall. The fire has taken a new lease of life and a small flame flickers cheerily. Gressier sinks with a sigh into the brocaded chair that the Countess draws forward, and watches with half-closed eyes the woman as she busies herself with his comfort.

From a court cupboard that stands between the long windows she brings wine and cakes and stands by the young man while he refreshes himself. But

it is not until she has, with deft fingers, bound up the wound in his leg that she will consent to listen to his story. It is a story that, from rumours that have reached her during the day, is but a confirmation of her worst fears.

It is the story, now so well known, that was to ring down the years, the story of a populace, outraged at the behaviour of their king, turning upon their master, attacking with force of arms the almost sacred dwelling of one who had been, in their eyes, little lower than their God. It is a story of passion, of bloodshed and of the heroic devotion of a little band of soldiers ready to die rather than be false to their oath of fealty. The Countess du Barry, leaning over the arm of the chair, listens with half-parted lips, reading more into the eloquent pauses of the wounded man than in his utterances. It is no part for him to tell of the heroism of his own battalion of the *Petits Pères*. Had the woman looked again into the heart of the fire at that moment she might have seen the great unwashed crowds plunging up the wide stairways of the Tuileries, the wrecked apartments, the shattered panels on the doors behind which terrified women cowered. She might have seen in the coals that desperate encounter in the gardens, the sabre-slashed trees, the trampled parterres, the fountains crimsoned with the blood of the supporters of the Bourbon. . . .

“ And your wound ? ”

"A sabre cut, Madame la Comtesse, not serious I think. I did not come away until I saw that all was lost and that I could serve my King no longer by remaining. The people, madame, have the upper hand, and God alone knows what will come of it. The King is prisoner."

"Louis in the hand of the mob . . . and Marie Antoinette?"

"Is with her husband. But I think they are in no immediate danger. I was long in coming to you, madame, but it was necessary to have caution. They are hunting high and low over there in Paris for the few of us who escaped."

For a moment the woman does not speak. She looks intently at the young man as though she would read his inmost thoughts. Then—

"And you think that I am in danger . . . here in Louveciennes?"

"Madame has many enemies."

"Enemies. Yes, I suppose I have made enemies. And yet I have done the people no wrong. I, too, am of the people. They have had many kindnesses at my hands."

"But madame does not understand that it is a world gone mad. Perhaps, too, those whom you have befriended hate you the more. It is human nature, they tell me, to do so."

He laughs bitterly, his mind running upon the deeds of brutality he had himself witnessed that day.

"And yet, Jules, I will not run from them. If they come for me they will find me here. I have faithful servants in Louveciennes, my own little regiment of *Petits Pères* as it were, men who will die in my service as your men have died in their king's." The woman crosses to the window and flings aside the heavy curtains. "Perhaps, before dawn, my gardens will be drenched in blood even as the gardens over there in the Tuileries are drenched. . . . But, pardon, I am forgetting. If they come, they may, perhaps, spare a woman, but we must think of you. It is a warren, this Château of Louveciennes, in which we will lead the ferrets a merry game of hide and seek. . . . Come, Jules." . . .

Long into the night the Countess sits alone in the dining-hall of the château, alone but for the shadows and the phantoms of her own conjuring. The fire dies down from rosy embers to grey ash and the dawn creeps in through the window which she has left uncurtained, creeps like a ghost, greying the features of the woman who sits motionless, alone with her past.

Tragedy was in that fateful autumn of seventeen hundred and ninety two, taking full toll of Jeanne, Countess du Berry. For a full month following the affair of August the tenth, Jules Gressier lay between life and death. For all that the sabre cut in his leg had seemed a trivial thing, the energy that he

had expended after receiving the wound was enacting payment in full for the outrage. Perhaps, too, the lack of good medical attendance played its part in the refusal of the hurt to become whole. Be that as it may, the moon was again silvering the gardens of Louveciennes and the foliage of the forest was steeped in autumn's dyes before Jules Gressier was well enough to be abroad.

It was upon the first day that he took the air in the gardens that fate shot her second bolt at the Countess by the news, brought by a trusty servant of du Barry's, of the death of the Duc de Cossé-Brissac. The details, although they were meagre enough, were of the spirit of the times—a nobleman being conducted from Orléans to Paris—a mob, enraged beyond all bounds by their hatred of aristocracy—cut traces in the Rue Satory—a body bleeding in the gutter. . . .

And with the passing of the owner of Louveciennes fear, stark and naked, seized upon the soul of Jeanne du Barry. To her it seemed as though the last prop that held her in security had snapped asunder, that at any moment, now that the name of Cossé-Brissac was in every mouth, attention would be drawn to the château. It was to her as though the mob were already at her gates. . . . she could almost hear the trampling of her paths by the rough sabots, almost see the red caps bobbing through her shrubberies.

No talk now of remaining in Louveciennes, but even in her fear it is curious that the woman's mind

should run rather upon the material side of her situation. There was in this favourite of kings a certain fatality, a feeling that, act as she might, she was powerless to avert the will of heaven. A strong sense of the mystery of religion was hers, instilled into her girlish heart, doubtless, by those patient sisters of Saint Aure. It was as though she looked upon her life, her soul, as things apart from her own keeping, inexorably subservient to the will of her Maker . . . but also, to her mind, there were things of earth with which Heaven had no concern.

She had been sitting with Jules upon the terrace of the château when the news of the Duc's death had been brought to her. Even while she had discussed the tragedy with the dead nobleman's aide her eyes had wandered to a window framed in ivy above their heads. There were treasures there, wealth that was hers alone and which should never pass into the hands of those who, sooner or later, would come ravaging into Louveciennes. Even if she escaped with her life, and Jeanne Vaubernier had, in her career, been in many a tight corner, what would that life avail her without her treasures? Perhaps in England, if the good God permitted her to reach that land of liberty, happiness awaited her if she still had her wealth; perhaps among those *émigrés* from her own distressed country she could set up her court, again taste the sweets of life. Perhaps——

She turned to Jules, speaking quickly, her hand upon his arm.

"You will help me, Jules? I have decided to leave Louveciennes to-night. It will be easy, if I act now, to reach Paris and lie hidden. There are many who are yet faithful to me. I know, Jules, I know exactly where I will be safe. But I must go alone to my hiding-place—alone, and dressed as a serving maid. I must take nothing with me—you understand—not 'ing."

"And you will tell me where this refuge is, madame?"

She shook her head.

"I dare not, Jules. An old servant of mine, who carries on business as a laundress, will take me in. I will be one of her workwomen."

"And the château?"

"Can be burnt to the ground for all I care. But it will be but a shell they will burn, Jules."

"A costly shell, madame."

The woman turned her head and gave an anxious glance up and down the terrace. Then leaning forward she whispered—

"You are well now, Jules well enough to do me a service?"

"Madame . . ."

"Oh, I know. Only I feel that I am putting too great a strain upon you who are so newly recovered from a wound. But it is necessary. Listen. To-night I will leave here and take the road to Paris

—to my laundry. You, too, will leave Louveciennes and we will part at the gates yonder. You will go west, Jules, and I to Paris. You are a man and can win through where a woman would fail. For me, I will be safe in Paris, I am of the people, as I told you, Jules, and I can speak their tongue. You will take my jewels and papers to England with you and place them in safe keeping in your name. They are small but valuable, and you can conceal them about your body."

"I am to leave them with your friend madame?"

She smiled sadly.

"Alas, Jules! I have but few friends in England and I know not where to find those I have. But there are banks in London that one can trust with one's soul. It is to one of these houses that I want you to go. You will make what arrangements best suit you and write to me at once. A letter addressed to Citizen Delarne at the *Bonnet Rouge* Tavern in the Rue de la Harpe will find me. Then you will come back to Paris."

"And if I fail?"

The woman shrugged.

"If you fail, Jules, it is God's will that Jeanne Vaubernier should return to the gutter in which she was born. I will make a good *blancheuse*, Jules, and good washerwomen do not starve."

The sun went down that night in a bank of storm clouds that bid well for the enterprises upon which

Jeanne du Barry and the young aide were to embark. Rain would fall before midnight and your *sans-culotte* loves not the rain and the wind when there are wine-shops in the faubourgs where he can drink and brag over the doings of the day and plan with his cronies fresh deviltries for the morrow. Louveciennes would not be attacked that night, and the barriers into the city would be but loosely guarded.

In the boudoir of the Duchess, the room with the ivy-framed windows to which her eyes and thoughts had so often turned, the man and woman bend low that night over a table on which a single candelabra sheds a pale light, a light that is caught up and sported with by the gems beneath it. A little heap as of molten fire, among which, if one looked closely, one might have made out a pair of sleeve buttons each of an emerald, a sapphire, a yellow diamond and a ruby, miniatures surrounded by rose diamonds, a cross of brilliants in which were interwoven the initials L and D. B. There are also papers—documents of parchment, legal looking with their red seals. The woman dips her ringless fingers into the glittering heap and holds up to the light a string of pearls.

"Four hundred of them," she says, "a king's ransom. Rouen, the jeweller, values them at a hundred thousand livres. A hundred and twenty thousand, he said, but one must allow twenty

thousand, I suppose, for flattery. You will be wealthy catch for a footpad to-night, Jules."

The young man stares gloomily at the wealth before him, and the woman reads his thoughts.

"I know you will not fail, Jules. In a month—two months—you will be back in Paris."

"And I am to call at the *Bonnet Rouge*?"

"No. You are to write there only. On the first day of each month I will walk upon the Pont Neuf. Oh, I can be very patient where I trust, Jules. . . . She walks to the window. "There is Jacques below on the path. He will show you through the wood and on to the road. In an hour I will be gone also. Wrap up these baubles, Jules, my friend . . . and good-bye."

Jules Gressier rises from his seat and gathers up the jewels. He bends over the slender hand of Jeanne du Barry and presses his lips lightly upon it.

"I will defend your trust with my life, madame. All that a man can do, that I will do. If I come not to the tryst upon the Pont Neuf, you can buy a mass, madame, for the soul of Jules Gressier."

The young man steps back, and, turning, leaves the room without another word. The Countess stands for a moment watching from the window looking down into the darkened gardens until the figures of the two men are lost to sight in the shrubbery. Then, letting the curtain fall, she sinks into a chair, and burying her head among the strewn

leather cases and silken wrappings upon the table, sobs as though her heart would break.

And so Jeanne, Countess du Barry, passes from our story and we can follow the fortunes of the other character in our Prologue by glancing over the shoulder of Jules Gressier as he sits at a table in the big room of the Golden Cross Inn, whose windows look down upon the Strand in London. Those windows are curtained now and the candles in the sconces on the wall have been lighted, for a fog, such as the young Frenchman had never known, has crept up from the river and made a prisoner of the town. The young man has drawn his table up close beneath a cluster of candles and is leaning back in his chair staring at a sheet of paper before him and chewing the feather of a quill. Jules Gressier is telling himself at this moment that he has come to the most difficult part of his adventure and that he is more at his ease with a sword than with a pen. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he dips the unsoiled pen into the ink.

"It is perhaps desirable," *he writes*, "that I should set before you while events are fresh in my mind the story of my doings since I left you, madame, three weeks past, in the boudoir overlooking the gardens at Louveciennes. I have been, I fear, long in the doing of your bidding, but the fault must be placed to the credit of the times in which we live.

"When we meet, madame, I will tell you of the danger I so narrowly escaped at Saint Malo and of how, after a stay of a week watching the grey waters of the channel, I was forced to retire and seek another port of departure. This place I will not name here, fearing that, should the letter miscarry, my friends at the port might suffer. Here, suffice it to say, by the grace of God and the cupidity of an ancient fisherman, I was ferried across and landed, for my sins, on the most abandoned coast in all the world.

"Perhaps, madame, you do not know Cornwall, and I pray that if ever you come to England you will be set ashore elsewhere than upon that coast of desolation. Moreover, it is a far cry to London, and the English stage-coaches are slow and wearisome, and the much vaunted English tavern a delusion and a snare into which the traveller is beguiled and served with detestable fare and ale of a surprising thinness. A week it took me to get to the city, where for three days I lay in a low fever, so that only to-day have I been able to attend to the affairs that brought me hither.

"The banking house I selected, after many and careful inquiries, is that of Carlairs in Whitehall, where I was received in all courtesy by the head of the firm, Benjamin Carlairs. Acting upon your instructions I dealt with the business in my own name, mentioning as a reference the old Marquis de Sarbiel, who is too old and out of the world to

even hear of the borrowing of his honoured name. And the copy of the receipt I have secreted in a safe place here in London until the time arrives when I can reclaim your property. To-morrow I intend taking the coach from this hotel to Lewes, and so on to Brighthelmstone, where I have heard it is possible to get a boat to Fécamp. I should be in Paris in a week from this date.

"To-night I am due to dine with Jacob Carlairs, the nephew of the Benjamin I have already mentioned, an excellent young gentleman with, I imagine, a fair knowledge of the town. His house is at Hampstead, and he has promised to accompany me afterwards to a gaming-house he knows of in Adelphi Terrace. I am overjoyed at the thought of again trying my hand at picquet.

"There is no need to write more. By this letter you will see that your commission has been faithfully executed and that that with which you trusted me is in the safest of safe keeping.

"I have the honour to be, madame,

"Your devoted servant,

"J. G."

Jules Gressier flings down his pen, well satisfied with his work. The task that has been haunting him is at last an accomplished fact, and he is free to enjoy his youth in this curious old London of which he has read so much. In an hour young Carlairs would be with him, and, later, he would again

feel the fascination of the green cloth and listen to the music of the dice in the leather cup.

Jules Gressier reads with a certain pride the letter he had penned, and folding it places it carefully in his pocket. He rises from his chair and walking to the window parts the curtains and looks down into the Strand. The fog has lifted a little, but the traffic is sparse and the link-boys are still busy plying their trade. Jules yawns and gives a glance at the clock.

He will walk for half an hour, he tells himself, and cultivate an appetite for the somewhat *difficile* English fare that young Carlairs would no doubt serve up to him in his house at Hampstead. Also he would see something of the city beneath its yellow pall. A London fog may not be altogether pleasant but it is, to say the least, an experience: something about which he would be able to talk when the spin of fortune's wheel should again set him down in the gay world of Paris.

The young man descends the stairs and after drinking a glass of claret in the little bar-room of the tavern, passes out into the murky world of London and, in his turn, out of our story.

To this day there are parts of our city that lie adjacent to the river which are full of tortuous ways and dark arches and corners where the thief and assassin might, in the days of which we are writing, crouch in waiting. The streets leading down to the

Thames were such that no stranger should venture therein without escort. Those who care to visit the newspaper-room of the British Museum will find many a report of robbery and violence, the scene of which has been not a hundred yards from Charing Cross, and, if he will in particular look at the *Times* of the fifteenth of October, in the year seventeen hundred and ninety two, he may read as follows—

“ The body of the young man that was found in the Thames last Friday was yesterday interred in the churchyard of Saint Anne. The unfortunate gentleman was not identified, although it is reasonably certain that he was an *émigré* from the terrors that are raging in the land of our neighbours across the channel. Inquiries among his countrymen, who have set up a colony in the neighbourhood of Soho, brought no result, and it is to the kindness of certain of these strangers within our gates that their fellow exile was accorded decent burial. We can only surmise, from the nature of the man's injuries and from the absence of all papers or money, that the deceased was the victim of one of the band of cut-throats who haunt our city and with whom the authorities seem powerless to deal. The fact that the body was found within a stone's-throw of Temple Bar suggests to us that the unknown may have met his death in one of the darksome burrows of the Adelphi. Not for the first time do we draw the attention of our guardians of the peace to this ill-

lighted warren by the river, so long the lurking place of the dissolute and the vicious. That a man can be done to death within a few yards of one of the town's main arteries is a crying disgrace to the greatest city in the world.

END OF PROLOGUE

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THE STORY

1912

CHAPTER I

THE SUPPER-ROOM OF THE BELVOIR

STEADILY, during the whole of that last day of the year nineteen hundred and eleven, the grey mist had been floating up over London. It had hung heavily upon the water of the river and wreathed itself mystically about the towers and spires of the Metropolis. And now, as midnight drew near, it seemed as though the Old Year were about to pass into the tomb of time shrouded in a winding-sheet of yellow fog.

The Embankment showed a dim, unbroken line of pavement and dull glow of lamps. One had but to lean over the granite parapet to find oneself gazing down into what appeared to be a fathomless abyss of mist, and it was only by the oily *lap-lap* somewhere far below that one became aware that down there was old Father Thames flowing on, as ever he flows on, down from the peaceful hills and pastures, threading his sinuous way between the wharves and walls of the city, gathering to himself its mysteries and its dark secrets and carrying them with him down to the

healing silence of the great waters. And one had but to raise one's eyes to imagine that one looked out over a vast ocean, for the Surrey side was shrouded and only here and there a dull blur denoted the presence of some flaming sky sign.

As far as the eye could reach, on either hand, and that indeed was not very far, was no human movement save the measured walk of a policeman and the uneasy stirring of some earth-derelict from his slumbers upon one of the benches of the lost as he turned and drew his cloying clothes closer about him. Over all the great heart of London lay that curious muffled hush that ever accompanies her fogs.

The distant murmur of the traffic feeling its cautious way across Waterloo Bridge came to the ear elusive and unreal, a muted chord in a world of shadows. The horns of the motors that were carrying the favoured ones of the earth to, or home from, their pleasures set one thinking of syrens heard far out from shore. Even the clanging bells of the brightly lighted trams that slowly glided past from time to time came curiously muffled to the ear.

There had been a little snow early in the evening and the feet of the wayfarers had churned a passage of grey slush through the white. Of all the nights of that year this that was witnessing its passing was the most uncomfortable in which to be abroad.

But in the supper-room of the Hôtel Belvoir, the

giant caravanserais whose softly shaded windows towered up in squares of yellow radiance far above the leafless arms of the trees in the Temple Gardens, the misery and discomfort of the outer world were allowed no place. Those long windows that overlooked the river were tightly fastened against the fog, and if by some chance a poor wandering wisp of mist found an opening and sauntered into this abode of gilt and mirrors and silken-shaded luxury, it was only to find itself caught up and utterly destroyed by one of the whirring electric fans before it had a chance of entering the aristocratic throat of any favoured patron of the Belvoir, and, perchance, adulterating the aroma of his Corona or taking liberties with the delicate flavour of his *C'liquot '06*.

The windows, too, were shrouded in folds of amber silk, ample and clinging, that overlapped generously and shut out even a glimpse of the outer world. For what was there in that outer world that could hold the slightest interest to the diners of the Belvoir? What had they in common with mist-shrouded pavements and figures of woe huddled upon the benches of a desolate riverside? What had they to do with chilling winds and drabbed snow? It would never do for Mr. Kevinski, of Drapers Gardens, or Miss Maisie Sainte Claire, of the new revue that was drawing all London to the Odéon, to raise their eyes from their caviare or their prawns in aspic and encounter such scenes of human misery. And so the astute manager of the Hôtel

Belvoir, having no small knowledge of human nature, and being, in his way, wise in his generation, had pulled the heavy golden curtains close, for the Kevinskis and the Sainte Claires of the earth must be studied always.

It were easy, indeed, on glancing round the crowded room, to forget for the moment that such things as poverty and wretchedness had place in the world. The snowy tables, the glitter of silver and glass, the rose-shaded candles, the soft strains of the string orchestra cunningly hidden away in a grove of palms, the scent of the flowers, the laughter . . . all served to make up a scene of luxury and well-being sufficient to lull any one who witnessed it into the fool's paradise of thinking that all was right with the world.

For the greater part, the people seated at the tables were in the conventional garb of evening, but here and there, a barbaric note of colour was struck by some one who was supping previous to going on to the ball that was to be held that night at Covent Garden, there to speed the parting of the Old Year, and to dance in the first hours of the New. At one table a man, whose features well matched his scarlet gabardine of Mephisto, leant across and toasted the bold-eyed woman seated opposite to him; at another a gallant from the court of the Merry Monarch was studying the wine list through a monocle screwed firmly into the socket of his left eye. The lofty supper-room was, upon this last

night of the year, a place transformed. The holly and evergreens of the Christmas festivities of a week ago had been allowed to remain, and they hung now in gay festoons from the lustres of the great chandelier and twined their tendrils about the bonbons clustered at the feet of the epergnes. On the morrow an army of waiters would be there with ladders and shears and the Hôtel Belvoir, its little hour of pageantry done, would return to its sedate and well ordered self.

And now, having generalized in the matter of the supper-room at the Hôtel Belvoir, it would be perhaps as well to particularize upon a table that was set in the far angle formed by the last window and the mirrored wall.

Here a young man and a young girl sat at supper, and in their eyes was to be seen none of the ennui that so plainly could be read in the eyes of so many of the others around them. Their smiles, and they smiled often, were the smiles of those who stand in the April of their days, upon the very threshold of life, and who, peering in between the gilded portals, find the prospect good.

Denis Carlairs was twenty-six, clean-shaven, and with the handsome, laughing eyes of a schoolboy. As he leant across the table to talk to the girl the soft glow of the silk-shaded candles shone upon his dark head and played little shadow tricks across his face.

"But, Nora, the police will soon ferret out a little

thing like that," he was saying, "besides, it wasn't worth a fortune, was it?"

The girl raised the lashes from her eyes. They were large eyes, somewhat cold, perhaps, and they shone deep and violet tinted in the candle-light. Upon the flower-like little face was brewing a storm of discontent, and the red lips pouted adorably.

"You've got no soul, Denis. You know it's not the value, the money value, that I care about. That necklace was given to me by the manager of the Queen's when I had to take Miss Jocelyn's part last year. It was only a cheap one, but—well, no other will be quite the same to me. It's a matter of sentiment, I suppose."

"Poor old girl!"

"And besides," Nora Marsden went on, "I was looking forward to wearing it to-night."

She put her hand to her throat as though to finger the stones that she knew were not there.

The man cut the end from a cigar that he had taken from his case.

"Perhaps we can arrange something. Look here, Nora, can't I get you another. Isn't it your birthday or something? Any excuse is better than none."

The girl laughed.

"You silly boy. Jewellers aren't open at mid-night."

Denis Carlairs's face fell.

"Of course not. But I hate to see you disap-

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pointed. . . . Wait a moment. I think I have an idea."

"Never, Den. Where?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Nora. I've told you before that pretty girls have no right to be cynics. I tell you that I have an idea—a pretty good idea, too. If you hadn't been so rude I might have told you what it was. Now you have just got to wait and see."

He glanced at his wrist-watch and beckoned to a waiter. Then, with a smile, he signed to the girl and threaded his way between the tables to the door. They stood for a moment in the vestibule looking out through the revolving glass doors at the world of fog into which the hall porter was sending out signals of distress upon his cab whistle. A moment later the two young people were in a taxi being cautiously piloted up one of those steep little streets that serve as arteries to the pulsing life of the Strand.

"What's all the mystery, Den? Tell me."

The young man leant back on the cushions and watched a thin spiral of cigar-smoke eddy to the roof of the cab.

"You'll know in a moment. By the way, Nora, you don't generally take your jewellery down to the theatre with you, do you? Those dressing-rooms are so unsafe, there always seems to be a crowd of loafers about the passages."

Nora shook her head.

"No, it's just luck—sheer, rotten bad luck. I

wanted to look nice at the ball to-night. Kitty will be there, and I'm only a woman after all."

Denis laughed down at the little face that showed, dimly, so near his shoulder.

"Little cat! How did the thieves get in? Or was it some one connected with the theatre, do you think?"

"It was during the third act. Since I have been Miss Jocelyn's understudy you know I have shared her dressing-room. They were not after my jewels at all, but hers. My poor little necklace went with them. Perhaps they had no time to discriminate."

"And isn't there a clue? I suppose the police were called in?"

"Yes. Cissy Jocelyn's press agent got busy at once. It will be a fine advertisement for her when it gets into the papers. Can't you see the headlines? '*Daring Robbery in a Dressing-room. Well-known Actress Robbed of her Diamonds. Fabulous Value.*' I expect all the advertisement I will get will be by appearing at a stuffy court and giving evidence, that is, if they make an arrest. . . . Why, Denis, where are we? This isn't Covent Garden."

The cab had pulled up at the kerb before a large, prison-like, stone-fronted building, with a few shallow steps leading up to a heavy, closed door. Denis jumped out and assisted Nora. He was smiling into the girl's questioning eyes, and, wondering, she watched him as he turned to the driver and asked him to wait. Still wondering, she followed

him across the glistening pavement and up the steps, and stood by his side in silence while he selected a key from a bunch at the end of his chain, and, throwing open the door, made a motion that she should enter.

A policeman who was passing at the time stopped and threw the rays of his lantern upon them; then, as Denis turned, he touched his helmet.

"Happy New Year, Mr. Denis."

"Same to you, officer. Be about here for a few moments?"

"Up and down, sir?"

"Then just give an eye to the door, will you? Just for a minute or two. Five at the outside."

Denis drew aside, and with a little nervous laugh the girl slipped into the gloom of the building. It had been in her mind to refuse this strange adventure, for Nora Marsden knew well how to take care of herself. But the presence of the officer of the law made remonstrance out of the question. The girl had no mind to be mixed up in a street corner altercation at midnight in the presence of a policeman—hungry as she was for all the sweet uses of advertisement, that was not the brand of publicity she would choose.

And so she followed her companion without protest. She heard the great door swing back on its hinges and knew by a movement that Denis was feeling for an electric-light switch. He found it, and a small cluster of globes high up in the ceiling

leapt into life. They showed to the girl a long lofty room with severe green-washed walls and long rows of shining mahogany desks and green-globed gas-brackets. At the opening of the door a little of the outer fog had crept in and now cast a thin veil of mystery about the place. It was a drastic change from the gaiety of the Belvoir and the warm snugness of the cab. A chill seemed to gather about the heart of the girl and she drew back and stamped her little foot lightly upon the floor.

"Really, Denis, this is past a joke. I won't go a step farther if you don't tell me where I am."

Denis turned to her and laughed.

"What a little spitfire it is." He laid his hand over his heart and made the girl a low ironical bow. "We stand, madame, in the historic premises of the great financial house of Carlairs and Carlairs, of Whitehall, in the City of London, and of the Rue Scribe, Paris, bankers and financial advisers to half the county families in England and the nobility of France. Established in the year seventeen hundred and——"

Again the girl stamped her foot.

"Oh Den, do be serious! Why have we come to the bank?" The girl spoke in a whisper, and gazed rather fearfully into the shadows about her.

"Come on, Nora, and don't ask questions. We are going a little further for the necklace."

"Necklace . . . my necklace isn't there."

"Oh, not the old thing you lost. I've something

better than that. Kitty will become emerald with envy when she sees you to-night. Miss Nora Marsden will go to the ball with a king's gift about her white throat."

Nora drew back towards the door and tried to remember how many glasses of champagne her escort had taken at supper.

"Denis, what on earth are you talking about? Let's go out to the cab. I don't care a scrap about the necklace—honest I don't."

But Denis was already leading the way between the long rows of desks towards the back of the building. For a moment the girl stood in hesitation and with more than half a mind to run to the door. Then the sense of adventure caught her and she felt a keen curiosity to know what Denis had meant. Gathering her skirts about her, she followed.

"There are a few steps here, Nora—five—that's it."

There was the sound of a key in a well-oiled lock, two ponderous doors swung noiselessly back upon their hinges, and Denis, entering, switched on an electric light and beckoned to the girl.

"Come on, Nora, there's nothing to be frightened at."

Entering, the girl found herself in a heavily built vault, low-pitched and oppressive. The walls of concrete were studded here and there with great square green iron doors, doors with brass handles and combination locks. About her, Nora saw that

the floor was piled high with leather-bound ledgers and black enamelled tin boxes. Upon these latter she read names lettered in white, names of families the highest in the land.

Then she saw that Denis was kneeling before one of the safe doors, and was already busy with the tumblers of the combination lock. Nora watched him with fascinated eyes and parted lips, watched while he twirled the little metal disc this way and that; then, with a turn and a wrench at the brass handle, the heavily studded door stood open. The man peered for a moment into the dim recess, then, inserting his arm, pulled out a small box, depositing it at Nora's feet.

It was a curious picture: the low ceiling, the dusty shelves the sombre bindings of the ledgers—and the girl. She stood there, her skirts raised daintily above her high-heeled satin shoes, looking down wonderingly at the box, a small oak chest, its wood worm-eaten, its brass corners tarnished and dulled with the passage of years. Denis was on his knees, working with a key at the old metal lock. The hinges groaned a little as he pushed back the lid, and a cry of admiration burst from Nora's lips—

"Why, Den, how beautiful!"

The chest held a curious collection, and, for a moment, the man and the girl stood looking down at the medley of rings and brooches and chains and miniatures, with, here and there, a piece of discoloured lace-work or the mellow binding of some little volume.

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The rays from the electric globe above their heads sparkled among the gems and threw up sparks of fire, red and green and opal and orange. Denis stooped and groped for a moment among the treasures before his fingers encountered that for which he was seeking. When he rose to his feet he held in his hand an oblong case, oval in shape, and covered with worm-eaten faded violet silk.

He pressed the spring that released the fastening and held out the case to Nora with a little laugh.

"What do you think the fair Kitty will say when she sees you wearing this, eh?"

Nora did not answer. Her eyes were fascinated at what she saw lying coiled on the little bed of faded white satin—a superb string of pearls. It would seem as though the stones rejoiced at again seeing the light, for they glowed amazingly in the light of the globe above them. All but the stones passed from the girl's mind. She forgot her fear, forgot the fog and the cab awaiting them at the door, forgot even Denis until, before she was aware what he was about, the young man caught up the gleaming string and with a quick movement clasped it about her throat. Nora came back to earth and gave a little shudder.

"Oh, Den, how exquisite! But how cold they are."

She put her hand to the back of her neck as though she would unclasp the gems, but Denis stayed her. He stepped back and gazed at her admiringly.

"Don't touch them, Nora. You look stunning."
Her frightened eyes met his.

"But I can't wear them. You've done wrong to bring me here, Den. Suppose any one should come. Whom do they belong to?" And then, woman-like, Nora turned her head as though she looked to find a mirror upon the grey-green walls of the vault.

"They belong to nobody, Nora. That's the point."

He had put the case back into the chest and was dragging the latter towards the safe in the wall. Nora took a step forward. The door swung back into its place, and Denis stood there with folded arms and smiled down at her.

"No questions, Nora. One of these fine days I'll tell you the history of those pearls. That box has been in the care of the bank for over a century without being claimed, and it's not likely to be claimed before I put the necklace back to-morrow morning. Nobody will be a penny the wiser or the worse off for giving those pearls an airing. They will think they are again at Versailles. How ripping you look, Nora. I wonder if Madame du Barry looked half as beautiful as you do?"

"Madame du Barry?"

"Oh, don't get jealous; that's the name of the lady for whom that necklace was made. The man who footed the bill, or promised to foot it, was that giddy old monarch, Louis the Fifteenth. That

box was left in the care of my great-grandfather during the time of the Great Revolution. Guess the fellow who left it went back to Paris and got into the clutches of the mob before he could say where he had hidden his heirlooms or else he got done in over here in London. My great-grandfather thought the latter but he had no proof. Come along, Nora, you'll be the belle of the ball. Let me see that the fastening is secure. That's all right."

He switched out the light, and, after a moment's hesitation, Nora followed Denis up the steps into the purer air of the bank, and so out into the chill mists of Whitehall. The young man turned, after locking the doors, and slipped a coin into the hand of the constable who still waited by the cab.

"Rotten night, officer."

"Very raw out 'ere, Mr. Carlairs, sir; 'appy way to see the New Year in, I don't think."

He held open the door of the cab and passed the direction on to the driver, then stood watching the vehicle while it remained in sight. And when it had been swallowed up in the fog he turned to the gas lamp and spat reverently upon the sovereign in his palm.

"Open-'anded gent, Mr. Denis—bit different to his brother, or the old man either for the matter of that. Beats me 'ow they makes it pay, these 'ere banks, minding other people's money. Coving Garding Ball—well—well."

In the taxi the girl was strangely silent and pre-occupied. She leant back upon the cushions looking at her reflection in the little mirror let into the panelling of the cab. Still, she was labouring under the spell of the gems, of this peculiar Arabian Night adventure. It seemed to her as though for one flaming moment she had stepped into the fabled land of legend, had flown back across the ages to the realm of romance, to the world of rapiers and patches and high adventure. The return to the cab and to the fog bound streets of London had been somewhat sudden.

"I don't think I quite like it, Denis. I'm not very strong on history, but wasn't Madame du Barry guillotined?"

Denis gave a little laugh.

"I believe the lady did come to a messy end. You're not superstitious, are you, Nora?"

"Did you ever know an actress who wasn't?" Then, as though speaking half to herself. "First the necklace . . . then the knife. . . ."

"What's that, Nora?"

The girl put her hand to her throat and fingered the gems.

"Oh, I know you'll say that I am a little goose, Den, but they seem to be cutting into my flesh. That's what made me think of the guillotine. Don't you remember how cold I said they felt when you put them on? I wonder if poor Madame du Barry ever felt them cold about her neck like this. They're

uncanny. Den, don't you think that we had better drive back to the bank? "

The young man turned to her and took her hand in his, and looked smilingly into her eyes.

"I don't think anything, Nora, except that I am with the prettiest girl in all London and that we are in the twentieth century. Smile, Nora . . . here we are."

The girl roused and peered out through the fog towards the lighted foyer of Covent Garden Theatre.

"I'm all right, Den. It's nerves I expect. What with a robbery this afternoon and this adventure to-night, I will be having necklaces on the brain. I want a waltz, Den, a mad, whirling waltz to brush away the vapours. . . ."

A commissionaire was holding open the door of the cab, and the two young people passed through the throng of pleasure-seekers and entered the ball-room of Covent Garden.

CHAPTER II

IN THE MARKET

PERHAPS of all the sights that the Metropolis has to offer there is none that pleases the vision as does the carnival of laughter and gaiety with which the advent of the New Year is celebrated at the historic house in Covent Garden. For it is a time when all restraint is swept aside, and when King Mirth alone holds sway. Twisting, turning, laughing, chattering, the hours are danced away, while around the revellers the great heart of London is stilled in sleep, and while, but a stone's-throw away, great farm carts, piled high with vegetables and flowers rumble their heavy way into the market from the farms beyond the suburbs.

It would seem that any pangs that Nora Marsden may have felt at wearing the necklace that had graced the slender neck of Jeanne du Barry had vanished. She sat leaning forward, her elbows resting upon the velvet rail of the box. The light from below flushed the rounded chin and the delicate nostrils, and kissed the fair hair into little flecks of gold. Denis Carlairs, sitting a little back in the shadows of the box, thought that he had never seen so fair a face.

Since their first meeting at an August river party the young man had been a constant visitor to the cosy little flat, where Nora Marsden lived with her widowed aunt. There had sprung up between the girl and himself a comradeship that had fast ripened, so far as Denis was concerned, into love. And as he sat now, looking at the radiant face watching the dancers on the floor below, he asked himself whether he dare put his fate to the test.

Nora, he knew, loved the profession in which she was making such rapid strides to the front; perhaps like so many similarly placed, she would look upon marriage as a bar to her further advancement. A refusal would mean for him an end to everything, and Denis hesitated before he endangered the prospect of other delightful evenings such as this.

Also, there were other things to be considered. Sir Hector Carlairs would not take kindly to such a union. Indulgent as he had ever been, the baronet was a man of stern and narrow views; strict and unbending alike in his business life and his home, he was not the man to brook any interference in the career that he had mapped out for the boy, a career in which the choice of a wife undoubtedly had place. Sir Hector boasted, in narrow-minded pride, that he had never been within the walls of a theatre, and it was not likely that Denis would meet with welcome when he broached the subject of a wife from the hated region of the stage.

The military band was playing a lively ragtime.

and the fun on the floor was waxing fast and furious. Looking down, the scene set Denis thinking of some giant kaleidoscope, a whirring mass of colour. Pierrots, devils, cavaliers, fairies, witches, jostled each other and threaded their ways in and out among the maze. A little movement from the girl drew his attention again to her.

"It's nearly three, Den—it isn't fair to aunt. It's hardly playing the game, is it, because I know she won't go to bed till I come in."

Nora reached out to the chair behind her upon which she had thrown her wrap. Denis put out his hand, and the fingers touched upon her wrist . . . and stayed there.

"Nora. . . ."

She shrank back a little into the shadow of the curtains, and the arm beneath Denis's hand trembled ever so slightly. Into the girl's mind came the knowledge that the moment that she had dreaded had at last come to her.

"Sit here a little longer, dear. There is something I want to say to you . . . that I must say to you. I think it will be easier here among all this noise. You can guess, can't you, dear, what it is?"

There was no answer from the girl sitting in the shadow and the man went on.

"You don't help a fellow much, Nora . . . you know what I want to say . . . that I want you to be my wife. Don't answer in a hurry; it will mean

so much to me. I love you, dear, as I loved you when I first saw you that day at Taplow."

The little hand slipped away from beneath his.

"Oh, Den, I don't know what to say! We've been such pals, haven't we? It seems such a pity to break it all up. Marriage does break it up as a rule, doesn't it? I don't think I could leave all my work and settle down. Do you know, I'm frightened to death of marriage, especially a marriage such as this would be. I've seen so many of them. They don't work. They're all right for a bit, then the woman comes back to the stage looking tired and old and worn. If she had ever had a public it has forgotten her and chosen some other idol. People ought to marry in their own set. My father, Denis, was a tailor."

"Mine was a poor clerk, Nora."

The girl leant forward and looked for a moment at the man. Then she laughed lightly.

"How unreal everything is to-night. I think this wretched necklace must be haunted and that we are all bewitched. Take it off, Den, and let's get back to earth and sanity. Sir Hector's father was a baronet. How could Sir Hector be a poor clerk?"

"Sir Hector is not my father."

"Why, Denis, what on earth——"

"Oh, I'm not mad. Secrets become secrets no longer when a man's life's happiness is at stake. My father died twenty years ago. Shall I tell you his story?"

There was no answer save a little nod of Nora's fair head. The man's voice came to her subdued and somehow unreal.

"It was in the early 'nineties when Carlairs Bank had that sensational run upon it. A man, crazed by the fear that he had lost all his savings, forced his way into Sir Hector's office and threatened him with a revolver. The man fired, but missed his mark, and my father rose from his desk near Sir Hector and grappled with him—and received the second bullet in his heart."

"And Sir Hector?"

"Sir Hector did what a man of his temperament and strict sense of duty would be expected to do. He took the little five-year-old boy of the man who had lost his life in his service and brought him up with his own son and as his own son. I have always had a certain pride in the fact that I come of the stock of a man who died so bravely. And so you see, Nora, that your objection to our marriage—one of the objections I should say—vanishes."

"And is this known?"

"Yes. But it has been forgotten, and it is never mentioned. Hubert and I were brought up in all ways the same. We went to Marlborough together, and I took my degree at Oxford, while Hubert went to Cambridge. We took our places at the bank at the same time. Sir Hector's money can, of course, be willed away as he likes, but it is understood that

it is to be equally divided between us. The title, of course, goes to Hubert."

"It would not be divided if you were to marry me."

"Perhaps not."

"And you are friends, Hubert and you?"

For the smallest fraction of a second Denis hesitated, then—

"Oh, yes. We haven't a lot in common. He's rather a chip of the old block. I don't think he has ever been inside a theatre; at least he says he hasn't. I'm afraid I'm the scapegrace of the family. Hubert came from college with honours bristling all over him. I was sent down from Balliol with the finest crop of debts on record. I say, Nora, aren't we a little off our subject? Am I to have an answer?"

The girl raised her eyes, and there was something in their depths that caught at the heart of the young man, damping the ardour in his.

"Listen. I do like you, Den; I like you awfully—but I do want my freedom a little longer. I don't want to go into the cage just yet. I love my work, and there is not much room for anything else in my heart. They'd never give me that part in the new production if they thought I was going to leave them in the lurch by doing such a silly thing as marrying."

The girl had risen as she spoke, and now stood with her cloak over her shoulder smiling down at Denis. She leant forward, and for a moment his

lips rested on hers. Then they passed out through the crowd of dancers, out into the cold air of the market.

Nora raised her head and took a deep breath of the morning.

"How refreshing it is out here, Den, away from all the heat and noise. Let us walk a little, and you may buy me some flowers to take back to aunt. They will be so fresh and beautiful in the market, clean with the breath of the fields and the dew. What a shame to cut them and bring them here."

Together they made their way down the arcade of the market. One or two of the booths were open, and sleepy-looking clerks and porters eyed them curiously as they passed. The fog had lifted a little, and it was all very ghostlike—the huge market carts piled high with baskets, the horses standing with drooping heads. In the air the odour of blossom and wet woods and dawn.

The girl stopped suddenly at a shop before which stood a heap of crates and a basket of chrysanthemums—great snowy blossoms, the clean scent of which had caught at her senses as she passed.

"Buy me some of these, Den, and then you shall put me in a cab . . . and we are going to forget all our silly talk for a little time. . . ."

She broke off and buried her flushed face among the cool fragrance of the flowers.

"Choose what you want, Nora, I'll get a taxi there at the end of the alley."

Denis left her at the entrance to the shop and hurried away. There was no cab in sight, and, turning, he waved to the girl standing there, a bunch of white blossoms showing against the scarlet of her cloak. There would surely be a cab at the corner of Henrietta Street.

He was back in two or three minutes, and as he entered the arcade he saw at once that something was wrong. There was no red-cloaked figure standing now before the shop—only a dark little patch of people crowded at the door. Porters had left their loads and were running. Denis ran too, and elbowed his way through the throng.

"What's happened . . . where is . . ."

Nora had been taken into the shop and laid upon a heap of fern cuttings. She lay there as one dead, her eyes half closed, her face white as the flowers she still clasped in her hands. Some one had loosened her cloak at the throat, for the lace and chiffon was torn and disarranged, and the proprietor of the shop was dabbing at her forehead with a sponge.

Denis fell on his knees beside the still figure and took one of the little hands in his. When he looked up his face was as white as her own.

"What was it?"

He sent his inquiring eyes wandering from one to the other of the faces clustered about him in the doorway. A market porter pushed himself forward.

"We 'eard a scream, me and my mates, guv'nor,

and see this 'ere lady strugglin' with a cove—toff 'e was, sir, in a evening suit and a mask. One of the gents, we thought from the theayter, a follerin' 'er I should say. Trying to kiss 'er I fink 'e was."

There came a little movement from the heap of fern. Denis, bending down, saw that the eyes were open—eyes that stared wonderingly.

"Are you hurt, dear?"

The girl struggled up until she leant upon her elbow. Her eyes were wild and staring now and dazed a little at returning memories. She passed a shaking hand across her forehead.

"Oh, Denis . . . my throat. . . ." She gave a scream that echoed loudly, shrilly, in the deep vault of the arcade. "Oh, my throat . . . first the necklace, then the knife. Do you remember my saying that, Denis?"

"Yes, yes . . . lie down, Nora."

He laid her gently back upon the ferns, and as he did so he glanced anxiously at her throat. Scratched it was, and here and there, on the fair skin, showed the blue bruises of brutal fingers. The du Barry necklace was gone.

He turned towards the doorway and spoke quietly but rapidly.

"Help me to get her to a cab, and a hundred pounds to any one of you who finds the man who rob . . . who attacked her."

"Lor' luv yer, sir, might as well try and catch last Christmas. Scooted down that alley, he did,

like you couldn't see 'is 'eels for dust. Can the lady walk, guv'nor? "

" Yes . . . I can walk. . . . Oh, Denis, take me out of this."

" Come, Nora. Don't worry, the police will trace it."

He broke off suddenly and said no more just then. The police must be the last people to hear of the affair. There would be a description of the necklace in all the papers, and it could not fail to reach the ears of Sir Hector; and the story Denis would have to tell of how the gems came to be in the possession of Nora Marsden, of the Princess's Theatre, would be a strange one indeed.

CHAPTER III

THE PARIS HOUSE OF CARLAIRS AND CARLAIRS

THE Paris branch of the banking house of Carlairs and Carlairs was situated at the end of an unpretentious courtyard in the Rue Scribe, a little backwater of the capital, sedate and unfrequented, but still within sound of the great surging boulevards. There was little in the outward aspect of the offices to speak of the important position held in the gay city by the concern presided over by Sir Hector Carlairs. Three or four shallow steps led up to a wooden doorway with glass panels protected by iron grilles. Beyond this a small square hall with doors on all sides save that immediately facing which was occupied by the staircase that led to the upper regions, let out for the most part as small residential apartments. Vastly different from the dignified premises in Whitehall.

The baronet, himself, seldom now came to Paris. Since the death of his wife Sir Hector had lived a strictly retired life, and the monthly visits to the Rue Scribe had devolved upon his son, a duty which to Hubert was frankly distasteful: frankly, that is, to the world. For, if one were to peep in upon

Mr. Hubert Carlair on a certain afternoon of January, in the year nineteen hundred and twelve, one would be forced to the conviction that that gentleman's lines instead of being, as he would have had the world believe, cast in desolation, were cast in very pleasant places indeed.

For of all the pleasant places upon a sunshiny winter afternoon there are few more to be desired than a front floor apartment in the Hôtel Naudin, few gayer sights than the Rue de Rivoli with its string of smart carriages and gleaming motors, its well-dressed men and exquisitely befurred women, and, across the street beyond the tall railings, the noble architecture of the Tuileries showing against the clear blue of the winter sky.

Hubert Carlair stood at one of the long windows drawing on his gloves and looking down upon the animated scene below him with eyes that denoted, at least a temporary satisfaction with his lot. From his Homburg hat and his sable collar to his immaculate boots, the son of Sir Hector Carlair was the beau ideal of the Parisian *boulevardier*. He was a handsome man, dark, and with a skin of clear olive that was a legacy from a mother who had been in her day one of the loveliest women in London Society.

The man gave a glance at the gold watch strapped to his wrist. Five o'clock. The hour of the absinthe as it is known in Paris; that delicious hour when one throws off all thought of dingy offices

and sits with one's friends upon the terrace of one's favourite café and watches the crowd of cosmopolitan idlers thronging the broad pavements. And Hubert Carlairs's own particular café was the De la Paix, from the corner of which one can sit and smoke and watch half Paris.

He turned from the window and, as he crossed the room, saw for the first time an envelope lying upon the table. Evidently it had come while he was at the office, and he had failed to see it when he entered his apartment. He took it up and held it to the faint light that came in at the window. There was something in the small cramped writing that caused a frown to settle for a moment upon his face, a frown that passed only to return as he slit the envelope and read the contents of the letter it contained.

The man read it twice, then crumpled the sheet of paper between his nervous fingers and sank into a chair, and sat there staring out over the darkening gardens of the Tuileries. He took off his hat and passed a silk handkerchief across his forehead. For perhaps five minutes he sat there motionless, then, smoothing out the letter upon his knees, he folded it carefully and placed it between the leaves of his pocket-book.

Hubert Carlairs locked the door of his room behind him and walked slowly down the wide carpeted stairs and out into the Rue de Rivoli. A few men clustered about the entrance nodded

to him, but he returned their greetings abruptly and, passing beneath the arches, made his way slowly along the Avenue de l'Opéra. Evidently the letter that was now reposing in his breast pocket had fulfilled its mission and taken from its unfortunate recipient all the joy that Paris had to offer upon that winter's afternoon.

The hour of the absinthe, too, would not appear, upon this particular afternoon, to be so pleasant a function to Mr. Hubert Carlair as that gentleman usually found it. The opal liquor in the goblet before him had remained untasted for half an hour after he had taken his seat at the corner table of the Café de la Paix; the cigar he had lighted had long since gone out, and at least three salutations from passers-by had been unheeded. For one moment only had a little gleam of interest showed in Hubert's face—it was when an urchin passed shouting out the late edition of the *Presse*.

The man leant forward and signed to the *gamin*, and, having bought a paper, opened it at the racing news. He smiled bitterly as he refolded the *Presse*. Hubert Carlair finished his absinthe at a draught. Two blows had fallen upon him within the hour.

And yet, had he taken the trouble to ask himself, he would have seen one at least of the blows could not have been, in any event, long averted. Lewison was not the man to put up with evasive answers and specious promises for ever, even from a man in such a position in the world as the son of Sir

Vector Carlairs. Simon Lewison was, as he often told his clients, not in business for his health, and however anxious and willing he might be to assist his friends, business was business and the interest upon moneys that he had been good enough to advance must be fully paid—and paid to time. The letter that Hubert had found awaiting him that afternoon at the Hôtel Naudin had been courteous in the extreme—deadly courteous. At every smooth sentence penned by Simon Lewison, Hubert had seen, in his mind, the man's oily smile, heard the low, whining voice. The heavily quilled signature with which Simon Lewison had signed himself as “dear Mr. Hubert Carlairs’s humble servant” was full of aggressiveness and carried in it a ligraphy, as doubtless it was meant to convey an inexorable message.

As a matter of fact, as Hubert read the letter for the third time, sitting upon the terrace of the Café de la Paix, the carefully worded sentences of Mr. Lewison resolved themselves into the intimation that if Mr. Hubert Carlairs did not within a month of the date written beneath the letter, at the leading of Conduit Street, Piccadilly, pay to Simon Lewison the sum of eight thousand pounds, being moneys advanced to him, interest accruing thereon, the said Mr. Lewison would be under the necessity—of a most grateful necessity—of handing Mr. Hubert Carlairs promissory notes to his father, Sir Hector Carlairs. He gathered, also,

that Mr. Simon would feel great the taking of so drastic a course, being for Sir Hector Carlairs the deepest and most profound respect.

It was the blow that had been impending, and had fallen with such force that afternoon in the North Sea. The second blow that came from the perspective of the racing column of the *Presse*, was, by comparison, unimportant. The fact that Hainault had failed to land the Prix du Bois merely made the necessity of action the more urgent. In other words, the urchin who was still raucously calling his pals down the boulevard had been humiliated by an instrument chosen to show him plainly that the turf was not the way out of his difficulties, and that something must be done, and that right quickly, if the worthy Simon Lewison were to be spared the trouble of approaching Sir Hector Carlairs.

Hubert was rather glad that "Hainault" had been left at the post, and so had missed his chance of the Prix du Bois. True, it would have meant a few thousand francs in his pocket, but in any case those poor francs might have brought him the ease that a condemned criminal experiences when he is informed that his execution is postponed for a week. A few thousand francs would, in the case of Hubert Carlairs, serve but to put off the evil day, would be but a drop in his vast ocean of debt. It was possible, just possible, that Simon Lewison would consent to hold his hand for a month for a few thousand francs. . . .

And then there came into the mind of the son of Sir Hector Carlairs a certain thought that had been hammering at his brain for many a long day. It was an evil thing, a thing that he, to give him due credit, had time after time brushed aside. But like all evil things, the little devils that had done the hammering had bided their opportunity. Their satanic master could wait patiently so long as in due time they accomplished that which he had sent them out to do. The opportunity came upon that January afternoon at the Café de la Paix, and with one blow of their hammer the little devils departed from him, their task well done. Details of the evil thought that had hitherto eluded him became, of a sudden, clear to the mental sight of Hubert Carlairs. Before him shone a vista of wealth and continuous delight. What a fool he had been not to listen to the little devils before.

And so, action forced upon him, Hubert Carlairs ordered another absinthe, and at the same time requested the waiter to bring him materials for writing. Between sips of the *Pinaud Frères* Mr. Hubert Carlairs wrote a letter to Monsieur Thomas Bannister, No. 19 Rue Richelieu.

It was not a long letter, and it was signed with initials only, for it is well, when writing to the Thomas Bannisters of the world, that one should not unduly commit oneself. Hubert committed himself only so far as to suggest that he would be at the Café d'Harcourt that night at eleven. To a man

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like Thomas Bannister, such an intimation from a man like Hubert Carlair would be all-sufficient.

Always, there is a certain satisfaction in having taken the plunge one has been meditating, in having burnt one's boats behind one, and reaction, with its soothing calm, came to Hubert Carlair at the moment when he saw the messenger he had summoned disappear in the crowd upon his way to the Rue Richelieu. True, there was yet time to withdraw from the perilous path he had mapped out for himself. Five hours remained to him before he would meet Bannister in the d'Harcourt, five hours in which he could weigh and re-weigh the pros and cons of the desperate undertaking. Again, those five hours might be most profitably spent in deciding ways and means and in the working out of details. A moment's reflection, however, told Hubert that he would be wise to leave such details in the more capable hands of his partner. Thomas Bannister he knew to be a past-master in the art of intrigue, a man who would gather up the many threads and make order from what was at present a somewhat chaotic scheme. No, it would be better for Hubert to clear his mind of schemes and confusing details and spend the five hours in a manner befitting the Queen of Cities and the fine winter evening.

A little dinner at the Taverne Royal, and perhaps coffee at Maxim's. Then a couple of hours at the Folies Bergères would bring him to eleven o'clock and to the Café d'Harcourt. He would not return to

the hotel and dress; the habitués of the café in the Latin Quartier were apt to look askance at broadcloth and fine linen. Also, now that his appreciation of absinthe was restored, it would be pleasanter sitting there for an hour than returning to the Naudin, pleasanter far in the little angle of the glass wind-screen of the Café de la Paix, watching the changing life of the boulevard and awaiting the time when the call of appetite should suggest a stroll to the Rue Royal and the Taverne.

From which it may be inferred that the mind of Mr. Hubert Carlairs was able to adapt itself to the needs of the moment

CHAPTER IV

MYRA

THE messenger who had taken Hubert's letter passed up the Italiens, and, crossing the road, took the Rue Richelieu, scanning the facias as he went in his search for number nineteen. He walked rapidly, being anxious to execute his mission and be off to a little wine shop in the Rue Cadet to dissipate the five-franc piece so generously given to him by the English milor.

Number nineteen he found to be a small apartment house, set back in a quaint, old-world, flagged courtyard, and screened from the road by two large wooden gates. The concierge, who was half-dozing in his rabbit-hutch at the door, looked up suddenly at the ring of footsteps upon the flags. The messenger paused—

"Monsieur Bannister?"

The concierge jerked his head backwards towards the dark cavern of the hall.

"*Première étage*," he said shortly.

The single electric bulb that hung above the head of the staircase on the first floor showed the messenger three doors, and it was upon the middle one

of these that he saw nailed a visiting-card bearing the name of Thomas Bannister. The man knocked softly.

It was a girl who opened the door, a tall, graceful girl, whose tea-gown of lace and chiffon ill-matched her somewhat shabby surroundings. It was not easy to make out the features, as the landing was but dim, and the passage and room upon the other side of the door was illuminated only by the flicker of firelight and the dull gleam of a shaded lamp.

"Monsieur Bannister?" The messenger held out, as he spoke, the letter given to him by the gentleman at the Café de la Paix.

"Monsieur Bannister is not in at present. You have a message for him?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. A letter from a milor."

"And who is the milor?"

"I do not know, mademoiselle. A gentleman who was at the Café de la Paix gave me five francs to deliver this to Monsieur Bannister. I may leave it. Yes?"

The girl held out a slim hand and took the envelope.

"Thank you. Monsieur Bannister will have this the moment he comes in."

The writing upon the envelope which the girl held to the lamplight conveyed nothing to Myra Mannering. Evidently it was but a note from one of the many friends that her uncle seemed to possess in every capital in Europe. She reached

up and set the letter against the clock, where he would be sure to see it upon entering. Then Myra took up the book she had been reading and sank into the deep embrace of a low-seated chair.

But the coming of the messenger had cut asunder the slight thread of interest the story had held for her. Instead, the girl cupped her chin in her hands and gazed into the heart of the coals. She was thinking still of her uncle's friends, the friends that the coming of the letter had brought into her mind. They were friends with whom she had little in common; in fact, it always seemed to her that the less she saw of them the more pleased was her uncle. And her thoughts, once started, ran riot over the three years since Thomas Bannister had given shelter to his dead sister's child.

Three years. And during that time the little household had lived in half the big cities of the continent. Myra would have found a difficulty in naming their resting-places. Some stood out distinctly, and there were many sunny memories . . . a winter at The Hermitage, a glowing autumn in Rome. And after Rome had come Milan, and that hideous little flat high up in the Via Mendaro. . . .

That had been the most drastic of all the changes that had given interest to a life that, at best, seemed to the girl but a wasted and aimless existence. Myra remembered that night at the Grand Hotel in the Eternal City, when her uncle had come to her room and told her that she must discharge her maid and

leave with him by the midnight train. There had followed a stealthy passage through Rome to the station, and the next evening had found them in Milan, and in the stuffy little flat in the Via Mendaro, with its sordid furnishings and its eternal smell of spaghetti and garlic. For two weeks Myra had not left that room, and her uncle had contented himself with endless watching of the street from the curtained window and with an hour's walk after dark. At the end of those two weeks Thomas Bannister, having in the meantime grown a small beard and moustache, had smiled again, and within three days was installed with his niece in the finest suite that the Hôtel Maurice, in Paris, could offer them.

There had been, too, that mysterious winter night when her uncle had come home with blood upon his hands and a deep cut in his cheek. Where were they then? . . . Ah, yes, she remembered, it was at the Hôtel Panonia in Buda-Pesth. They had left that night by motor, and the next day had found them in Prague. Memory crowded upon memory as the girl sat gazing into the fire of the flat in the Rue Richelieu.

Three years. Three years of ups and downs, of light and darkness, a life that had held many mysteries. But to a girl of eighteen it had not seemed to come amiss. There were times when she questioned her uncle, but they were questionings that were easily brushed aside by so astute a man of the world as was Thomas Bannister. And Uncle

Tom was generous to a fault, and if in the course of his business he was brought into contact with somewhat strange characters, surely it was no affair of the girl who owed everything to his bounty.

A muffled chime from the clock upon the mantelpiece called the girl from her day-dreaming and from her visions in the fire. Seven o'clock. Myra wondered whether her uncle would be in to dinner or not. The movements of Mr. Thomas Bannister were of that irregularity so irritating to the conscientious housekeeper. From the further room came the tinkle of silver as Annette set the table.

Myra crossed the room, drew the curtains of the window and looked down upon the courtyard of the house. It was quiet and peaceful here in the backwater of the great boulevards, and the murmur of the city came but faintly to her ears. Myra let fall the curtains, a little sigh of weariness escaping from her lips at the prospect of a lonely evening.

"Annette."

"Mademoiselle."

The trim waiting-maid came through from the further room.

"Serve dinner at half-past. Just a little soup and fish if Monsieur Bannister does not come in."

But Monsieur Bannister did come in. Even as his niece spoke there was the sound of a key in the door of the flat, and a moment later Myra was greeted by her uncle. The girl returned his kiss affectionately and took his coat and hat.

"I was just telling Annette to serve dinner in half an hour. You are going out again?"

Thomas Bannister leant over the hearth, holding out his thin aristocratic hands to the blaze. He was a handsome man of about fifty-five years, with greying hair and a short, pointed beard. The fire-light shone upon his thin, well-cut features, and played strange shadow tricks in the deep sockets of the eyes.

"I may be going out later, Myra—it's cold though, very cold. Mix your old uncle a cocktail, there's a dear girl. Any one been?"

"No, no one, uncle—oh, I was forgetting, a man brought a note for you. It's there by the clock."

Bannister rose from where he was crouching over the fire and gave a quick glance at the handwriting upon the envelope. Many years of living upon his wits and upon the lack of them in others had steadied Tom Bannister's nerves and steeled him against any surprise. And yet in one thing he was timid, and that one thing was where letters were concerned.

Just as some people are unaccountably afraid of cats, so Tom Bannister feared his post above all else in the world. There was to him something sinister, something menacing in the official *rat-tat* of the postman's knock, and always the daintiest breakfast dishes were unable to tempt his morning appetite until the heap of letters beside his plate had been opened and read.

The man now took the envelope from the mantelpiece with some misgiving. There was, so far as he could bring to mind, no one from whom he was expecting a communication, the few friends in Paris who knew his address were not given to committing themselves to paper where such a course could be avoided. The agony columns of the daily papers provided for Thomas Bannister and his friends a safer medium of communication than the postal service.

It was with a little smile of relief that his eyes rested upon the initials that told Bannister that his correspondent was Hubert Carlairs. It had been a couple of months since the young banker and he had foregathered in London, and the elder man had not known that Hubert was in Paris. He read the note, and crumpling it into a compact ball, dropped it among the glowing coals on the hearth. Myra, at the little sideboard, was mixing the appetizer for which her uncle had asked. He crossed the room and took the slender stemmed glass from her hands.

"I will be going out, I find, Myra, but not till later. I was wondering whether you would care to go to a theatre. There is a ripping revue at the Marigny and a new farce at the Royal."

"I'd love it, uncle. I was just wondering what I was going to do with myself. And I think I'll choose the Marigny."

"Good. I have an appointment at eleven, so I

will have to put you in a cab after the show. And now, my dear, have Annette serve the dinner. And Myra, I think a bottle of that Moselle—eh? ”

Myra went from the room and, left to himself, Tom Bannister sipped meditatively at his cocktail. There was something in the note that he had just read that was vaguely promising. It was undoubtedly written by a man labouring under the stress of anxiety, maybe fear—and men who laboured under anxiety were ever fish for the wily net of Mr. Thomas Bannister. And then Hubert Carlairs was a banker, and a banker should prove a pigeon well worth the plucking. Thomas Bannister had ever a predilection for banks.

To tell the truth, the gentleman himself was not free from anxiety. But, with Bannister, anxiety meant anything but panic, it meant simply a sharpening of wits for new battles. The cards at the club that afternoon had run wryly for him, and unless something came his way, before the month was out, to recuperate the failing vigour of his account at the *Crédit Lyonnais*, Myra and her uncle would have to depart for pastures new, quarters which would prove to be not nearly so much to the liking of Mr. Thomas Bannister as were the cosy rooms in the *Rue Richelieu*. Into the gloom of his thoughts this letter from a man whom he knew as slightly as he knew Hubert Carlairs came as a ray of hope. It was hardly to be thought that Carlairs would have made so strange an appointment

merely from the desire for Thomas Bannister's company.

He called to mind the details of the Frockson mortgages, a cunningly devised bit of jugglery in which, through the good offices of a mutual friend, Bannister and Hubert Carlairs had been of assistance to each other. He wondered whether trouble had come out of that little flutter on the brink of the law, whether Lord Frockson had really been the fool they had thought him to be. . . .

Annette appeared in the doorway to announce that dinner was served.

CHAPTER V

AT THE CAFÉ D'HARCOURT

POPULAR with the denizens of the Latin Quartier as is the restaurant that occupies the corner of the Boulevard San Michel, where it turns up by the Place de la Sorbonne, it is not a rendezvous greatly in favour with the financiers and Boulevardiers of the other side of the Seine. In choosing this retreat in the heart of Bohemian Paris, Hubert Carlairs had acted wisely. It was not at all likely that any of his friends of the Rue Scribe or the Hôtel Naudin would meet with him there. He left Maxim's at ten o'clock, and, lighting a cigar, walked briskly across the Place de la Concorde and boarded an omnibus for the Luxemburg. Skirting the gardens he crossed the Boulevard San Michel to the d'Harcourt.

The café was at its gayest as the young banker entered. Save for a few hardy and well-furred patrons, the little tables upon the terrace were deserted, for a bitter wind had come with the night and now blew in fitful gusts up from the river, and had driven the revellers into the cosy interior of the café where the orchestra was playing the latest syncopated importation from the States.

A glance round the long crowded room located the man he had come to meet. Thomas Bannister had taken a seat at a small table in the corner, and by an aggressive attitude, or by the distribution of largesse, had succeeded in retaining it to himself. A chair tilted on its fore-legs on the farther side of the table, suggested the coming *tête-à-tête*.

"Well, Carlairs?"

Hubert nodded and, lighting the chair, took his seat facing Bannister. He called a waiter, pointed to the empty glass, and ordered a coffee for himself.

"You drinking beer, Bannister? Beer at the time of night! And now, Bannister, I suppose you are wondering what on earth this is all about?"

Bannister shrugged his shoulders.

"Why wonder, my dear boy, when you have come all this way to tell me all about it? But why the giddy old d'Harcourt?"

"Because our little talk must be secret."

"And you're not known here, eh?"

Carlairs nodded and the other gave a little laugh.

"Secret as the grave for you, perhaps, but not for yours truly. I look in here at least twice a week when I am in Paris. I move in rather different circles from you, Carlairs."

Hubert glanced round the room apprehensively.

"But we can't be overheard here, Bannister."

"That's true enough, but hearing isn't everything. There's no need to move now. There's no one here I know to-night . . . except Dusky"

" Dusky? "

" Yes. The little rat with the red tie over there by the orchestra. That's Charlie Dusker. He's seen us together, and that's enough for Dusky to remember if it's half a century hence. He'll store it up for future use in one of the niches in that brain of his. Charlie don't miss much. Now, Carlairs what's in the wind? "

Carlairs did not answer at once. He looked across the room to the table indicated by Bannister. Dusker was a smartly dressed little man, plainly English, and his companions were a Frenchman and two women. The party was engaged upon a game of euchre, but the man known as Dusky had plainly one eye on the cards and one on the table where Carlairs and Bannister were seated. Hubert turned to his companion.

" Are you keen on another job with me, Bannister? "

" Depends. No more legal twistings like the Frockson affair. That stunt has given me more sleepless hours than I care to admit. I was wondering if that was what you wanted to see me about. Is it all right? "

" Right as rain. Frockson has gone back to the life he likes, with enough in his pocket to keep him quiet for years. No, this is a new wheeze. Crowds of money and a game after your own heart."

" And the details? "

Hubert took a sip at his coffee and lit a fresh cigarette.

"It's a longish story, Bannister, and I'd like to know if you're game."

Bannister passed a hand across the table. "I'm game," he said.

Hubert Carlairs allowed his eyes to roam about the Café d'Harcourt before he resumed the conversation. To all outward appearance Dusker and his friends were intent upon their game of euc're, and at none of the tables did he notice any one who could be regarded as in any way suspicious.

"It's a longish story, Bannister, as I said before, and it started a longish time back—as far back, as a matter of fact, as seventeen hundred and ninety-two."

Bannister smiled.

"What's the joke, Hubert?"

"There's no joke. I suppose you know that there was a bank of the name of Carlairs long before that date. We were established at the time of the South Sea Bubble. It's about our ancient history that I have asked you to meet me here to-night."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Hubert finished his coffee, and after a moment or two began his story.

"My great-grandfather, Benjamin Carlairs, was then head of the house, in 1792 that is, and the story has been handed down from father to son ever since. On the 10th of October—I can't be quite certain

of actual dates without reference—but it was in the autumn of '92, that a stranger, a young Frenchman of the name of Gressier called upon old Benjamin. He had with him a valuable lot of jewels, which he was desirous of leaving in the keeping of the bank. Our firm had then, as now, a large connection with the aristocratic families of France, and I have been told that it was upon the recommendation of a marquis, whose name I have forgotten, that young Gressier went to London and to Whitehall.

“He was acting he told my great-grandfather, for a certain great lady in Paris, who, fearing the terrors of the Revolution, had begged him to undertake an errand for her, being unable to leave France without being suspected of emigration, an offence in those days that meant death. The lady's name was not mentioned during the proceedings, and Gressier made it clear that he alone would be entitled to redeem the chest. Although it did not belong to him it was deposited in his name, and, to all intents, was his property. If at the end of two years the chest still remained unclaimed the bank was entitled to open it. They would then find instructions as to their future course of action.”

“This is getting interesting, Hubert.”

“Wait. My great-grandfather being, in his way, a wary kind of bird, asked that the chest be opened there and then, so that an inventory might be taken of the contents. To this Gressier would not

consent. If the introduction of the marquis was not sufficient guarantee of his good faith, well, there were other banking houses in London. To cut a long story short, old Benjamin consented to undertake the charge. The marquis was a good client, and he hesitated to do anything that might offend the old man. Gressier waited until the chest was stowed away in the vault, then he left to catch the Lewes coach to the coast, *en route* back to France."

"And the chest?"

"Was never reclaimed. At the termination of the period arranged the directors of the bank opened the chest, and, in spite of what Gressier had said, found no instructions whatever as to their course of action. Evidently the young man had thought it a formality, and that there was no danger of it ever being reclaimed by an impostor. My old great-grandfather wrote to the marquis, who was an *émigré* in Switzerland, only to get a vague reply from his sister that her brother's mind had become unhinged during the Revolution, and that since the execution of Marie Antoinette he had spoken to no one. Certainly, he had never, to her knowledge, known any person of the name of Gressier. It was to this family that old Benjamin now turned his attention.

"He went to Paris and made personal search. The only family of that name was one of a father and two sons who had lived near Arras, and had,

at the outbreak of the Revolution, thrown themselves into the maelstrom, giving all they had to the support of Louis. Of these three men, two were guillotined for their part in plots to restore the monarchy."

"And the other?"

Hubert Carlairs leant forward and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"The other, my dear Bannister, was your ancestor, Jules Gressier."

For a moment the eyes of the two men met across the table.

"And the answer to the riddle?"

"Is in the chest in the vault of our bank in Whitehall. Surely, Bannister, you can have no objection to adopting so romantic an ancestor?"

"None at all, my dear boy, so long as there is anything hanging to him."

Carlairs laughed.

"Oh, there's plenty hanging to old Jules—in the chest there is waiting a fortune. Although my great-grandfather found nothing in the way of a clue, there was plenty else. Bonds, and jewels, and title-deeds, title-deeds referring to a big estate in Normandy. The things had belonged at one time to Madame du Barry, but whether that was the lady for whom Gressier had been acting we can't say. The proof of the ownership, or late ownership, was in the device of the initials of Louis the Fifteenth and the lady upon some of the jewels.

Now, Bannister, perhaps you can see how useful an ancestor I've found for you."

For perhaps three minutes Thomas Bannister sat drumming his finger-tips upon the polished marble of the table of the Café d'Harcourt.

"You mean that as a descendant of the Gressiers I can claim?"

Hubert nodded.

"The simplest and the biggest thing you have ever been up against. It's yours if you say one word."

"And that word?"

"Halves."

A pause.

"Hard up, Hubert?"

"Damnably."

"And very trusting, eh? What if I put up a claimant after what you've told me? I know a score of men who would jump at it."

The other man smiled.

"Because, my dear Bannister, I'm many miles from being a fool. I've told you only what I wanted to tell you. This is where you need me. Listen. Young Gressier, when he left the bank, took with him a receipt signed by my great-grandfather. With my help, and not without it, this receipt can be duplicated. I can refer to the copy in the bank and provide you with one of the old letters containing Benjamin's signature—we have hundreds of them filed away. It's not a very hard one to copy—it's

more a matter of faking the ink. One of your friends will come in useful there."

"Don't be nasty, Hubert."

"It's only my joke, old man. So that is how the matter stands. Within the next few days, if you take it on, you must get busy and find out all you can about Jules Gressier. A visit to the château in Normandy should prove productive—it's near Louviers. I return to London to-morrow, and I will send you a heap of details and a copy of old Benjamin's signature. I'll send them to the Rue Richelieu. You see, Bannister, that I trust you; you see also that we are in the same boat, so long as I get my half from you, you will be quite safe. Make no mistake about that. Now we will get. I don't like the look of your dark friend over there at all."

Hubert Carlairs rose from his seat, and, paying the waiter led the way between the tables to the door giving upon the Boulevard San Michel. Together the two men walked down towards the river. It was as they were passing the great iron gates of the Palais de Justice that Bannister stopped and peered in between the railings.

"What is it, Bannister?"

"Thoughts, my dear boy, thoughts. I was wondering how many people know the history of this spot. I'm a romantic sort of cuss, Carlairs, and I know my Paris better than most men. Come here."

He pointed between the railings to the corner across the great cobbled courtyard. Hubert followed the direction of his finger and saw a dark doorway, and, leading down to it, a short flight of steps.

"Down those steps, Hubert, there is a restaurant, a place where the barristers of the court eat their *déjeuners*. It's a curious place, with a curious history. In seventeen ninety-three Gressier's friend, du Barry, and no doubt Gressier himself, came up those steps from that little room where Sanson had bound them and performed the toilet of the guillotine, as it was called. It was here, in the courtyard, that the tumbrils waited—the Cour de Mai, it was called. Interesting isn't it?"

"Very."

Bannister held out his hand with a short laugh.

"Good-night, Hubert. I'll take a walk along the Quays, I think, and try to work out a few details. I'll look for your letter in a day or two, and in the meantime I will put in some useful work digging up the shady past of my respected ancestors. Good-night."

Bannister watched Hubert get into a fiacre, then went on his way. On the Pont Neuf he paused, and, leaning his elbows upon the parapet, gazed down into the swiftly running Seine.

His mind was full of what Hubert had been telling him in the Café d'Harcourt. There was that in the story that strangely stirred his blood. Continual

wanderings upon the face of the globe, wild, rugged nature and strange cities had bred in Thomas Bannister a love of the bizarre, a keen sense of the romantic. Hubert Carlairs had been no mean judge of human character when he had selected Bannister to take a hand in the game.

The man raised his eyes from the black, swirling river, and glanced to where the two conical towers of the Conciergerie rose, gaunt silhouettes against the star-strewn sky. Bannister looked at them for a few minutes, and a curious smile broke the hardness of his features.

It should not prove very difficult for him to throw himself into this game, heart and soul, for it was one after his own inclination. A little imagination, and he would cease to be Thomas Bannister. Gressier was a good name—Armand would go well with it—Armand Gressier. Bannister rolled the high-sounding name once or twice around his tongue, and found it good. Perhaps it was in one of those cells guarded by those grim sentinel towers that the man who had journeyed to London in the interests of Madame du Barry had lain and waited for the dread summons to the guillotine.

Mr. Thomas Bannister lit a cigar and turned his steps to where the long rows of lamps picked out the Boulevard Sébastopol. He had said that he would walk, and he surely had plenty to occupy his mind. Thomas Bannister owned a brain that worked at its best when the world was sleeping.

Had fate ordained a better bringing up for Thomas Bannister there is little doubt that he would have gone far. Literature, art, the drama all found in Thomas Bannister an enthusiastic patron, and many a struggling painter in this Latin Quartier owed his start in life to his benefactions. Not for many a year had the man been so profoundly stirred as at the story he had just listened to. Gifted as he was with an imagination far above the ordinary, he saw and was fascinated by the romance that lay beneath what was to Hubert Carlairs merely an imposture for sordid gain. Bannister, as he walked Paris that night, was back in the world of the past. Within a stone's-throw of him had been enacted the scenes with which his newly acquired ancestor had been concerned. To Thomas Bannister the silent streets became peopled with the crowds of the faubourgs the night became alive with rushing feet and strident curses. Almost, he felt as though in very truth it was his blood ancestors who had lived in the vortex . . . that the name of Gressier was his birthright. . . . And in dreams such as these Armand Gressier, *alias* Thomas Bannister, walked the streets of Paris.

The city was at its quietest, even the late revellers had gone to their homes, but there was a stir in this quarter of the markets, where already great lumbering country vehicles were coming into the Halles with their vegetables. But they did not interfere with the current of Thomas Bannister's thoughts.

Also, it would be as well that Myra should be in bed when he returned to the Rue Richelieu. That would give him the night in which to map out his course of action. Myra was amenable. Bannister had trained her well, but the changes that were looming ahead in the lives of them both would call for careful and well considered explanations.

A clock over on the Boulevards was striking two as Thomas Bannister let himself into the flat in the Rue Richelieu. He hung up his coat and hat in the tiny hall and listened for a moment at Myra's door, ascertaining by the silence and the darkness in the fanlight above that his niece was asleep. With a little sigh of relief the man entered the dining-room, and closing the door drew his chair up to the dying fire. He set cigarettes and whisky within reach and prepared for a night's work. Leaning back upon the cushions of the chair, and with eyes half closed, Thomas Bannister allowed himself to merge into the personality of Armand Gressier. It was typical of the man that he took no notes of the conclusions to which he came: each detail as it was completed was stored away, as it were, in a pigeon-hole in that wonderful brain of his, to be forgotten until the right moment arrived for its use.

What, he asked himself, would he do were he, in truth, the descendant of the Gressiers, returned after three generations in, say Canada, to the home of his fathers? He would have certain documents . . . well, they would be provided all in good time by

himself, or by one of his friends whose skill with the pen was beyond reproach. Also, he would pay a visit to Père Lachaise and place a wreath of immortelles upon the tomb of his ancestors. Also he would visit the family seat . . . long since, of course, passed into alien hands. That is how he would act were he in reality a Gressier.

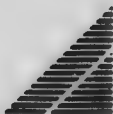
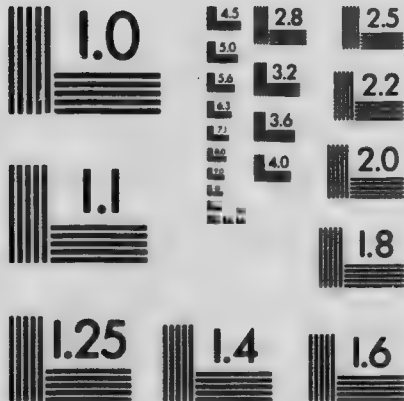
But as Thomas Bannister who had but borrowed the honoured name? Well, Père Lachaise should be visited any way. Who knows but among the tombs he might stumble upon information of his adopted family that would be priceless? The Gressiers were sure to have a tomb in that city of dead aristocrats. Also, he would look up a certain friend of his who held a minor position at the Préfecture and obtain a permit to delve among the archives of the great. By the time Hubert Carlairs returned from London, Thomas Bannister should be in possession of all there was to be learnt about the distinguished family of Gressier—or he would know the reason why.

And if, as two hours later, Thomas Bannister sought his couch, there was one fly in the ointment of his content, it was that fate should have sent, that night of all nights, Charlie Dusker to the Café d'Harcourt.



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CHAPTER VI

A CHÂTEAU OF FRANCE

THERE had been a powder of snow during the night, and the level plains of Normandy gleamed and sparkled in the winter sunshine.

The solitary traveller who had been set down at the wayside station of Marcel-sur-Eure stood for a moment watching the train that had brought him from Louviers wind its way out of sight, then he crossed the road to the Café du Dome.

No doubt the Café du Dome was a very charming house of rest and entertainment in the summer. Then the paved courtyard would be filled with pleasure-seekers, cloth-workers from the mills at Louviers, who had brought their womenfolk on Sundays as far as Marcel to feast their eyes upon the green beauty of the valley of the Eure and their inner man upon the thin red vintages of the Café du Dome.

But to Thomas Bannister the hostelry was far from inspiring upon this wintry morning. True, the valley was beautiful almost as in summer, the snow-covered hills and forests shone whitely in the frozen air, but the courtyard of the tavern was

desolate with its little iron tables piled up against the trellis that in the summer gave such grateful shade to the patrons of the Café du Dome.

Evidently mine host was not prepared to receive a visitor at that early hour, for after Bannister had knocked with the head of his cane upon the green-painted door, it was opened by a man who clearly had not long been out of his bed. At sight, however, of so promising looking a guest he changed the look of annoyance that was upon his face into a smile of welcome. He drew aside with the request that monsieur would be pleased to enter.

It was a low raftered room into which Bannister was shown, a room that still reeked from the drink and tobacco of the night before. The landlord hastily set about unbarring the shutters and throwing open the diamond-paned windows. Bannister drew a breath of relief as the clean air of the morning routed the vapours of the place. The landlord was apologetic.

"It is not often, monsieur, that one comes so early to the Café du Dome. Monsieur will have come out on the eight o'clock train?"

"From Louviers, yes. I stayed the night there, and I am anxious to get back to Paris this evening. Can I have some breakfast?"

"*Café complet?*"

"That will do. How far is it to Massey?"

The landlord thought a moment.

"By the road a little over three kilomètres. Monsieur is walking?"

"Yes. One gets cramped sitting in a train. By the way, do you know the Château Merlains?"

"That is this side of Massey, monsieur."

"It is occupied?"

The landlord laughed.

"By the rats only. No one has lived at Merlains this twenty years. Evidently monsieur does not know the château."

"I have heard it is interesting."

The man shrugged his shoulders and threw out his hands, palm uppermost.

"To those who like such things . . . perhaps monsieur will excuse me. I will see to the coffee."

The old fellow shambled from the room. Bannister crossed to the window and looked out. The tiny hamlet of Marcel-sur-Eure was but a cluster of cottages huddled around the station. Bannister wondered why a station had been built there at all. Away on the horizon he could see the dark smudge that was the smoke from the innumerable chimneys of the cloth-works at Louviers, and in the other direction he could make out the road running straight between its lines of poplars, a great avenue that led to, and was lost among, the hills in the distance. When the landlord returned with the coffee and rolls, Bannister questioned him, pointing towards the hills.

"Massey is in that direction?"

"Yes, monsieur, the village itself lies a little to the right. The château is between it and the road."

Bannister broke one of the rolls and poured himself out a cup of fragrant coffee.

"You spoke just now as though you did not like the château. I have come out from Paris to see it."

The landlord again shrugged his shoulders. He was sorry that he had given so bad an impression to a gentleman who, for all he knew to the contrary, might have ideas of renting the place. Such an estate would need many servants—coachmen, gardeners, chauffeurs—and servants need entertainment in the evenings, entertainments that the Café du Dome could provide to the profit of the landlord of that estimable hostelry. All of which passed through the man's brain what time he was cogitating upon the best way to improve the occasion.

"It is a fine place, monsieur. A little out of repair, perhaps, and gloomy. A curious history, monsieur."

"In what way?"

"One can hardly describe. It belonged years ago to the Gressier family, a family that, like many another in this country, was wiped out by the great Revolution. Since then. . . ."

"Yes. Since then? Whom does Merlains belong to now?"

"That, monsieur, is the curious history of which

I spoke. It belongs to no one, in a manner of speaking. The courts have been busy with Merlains ever since I can remember. In my father's time a lawyer from Paris lived there. That is many years ago. The château was vacant for some time after that, and then Baron Fourier, a financier from Bordeaux, took it. And all the time the courts were fighting, and the baron, having fought himself into poverty, drowned himself in the moat a dozen years ago. Since then it has been left to the rats and the bats, and they tell me the grass is breast-high in the gardens. They tell me, too, but I do not believe, that the ghost of old Fourier walks upon the waters of the moat at times."

And in spite of his assurance of disbelief the worthy man crossed himself devoutly.

"Haunted, eh?"

"I go by what the villagers tell me, monsieur. Jean Lacroix was telling me only last week that—"

Bannister finished his coffee and rose from his chair. He placed a five-franc piece upon the table.

"I should be back here by three, landlord. I will take a meal then . . . a little fish and an omelette . . . and catch the four o'clock train. That has a connection at Louviers, I believe, for Paris?"

"Yes, monsieur, the mail goes by that train. I will see that dinner is ready. A little sweet, too, perhaps, and a bottle of claret?"

The landlord stood at the entrance to the courtyard and watched the tall, well-knit figure swinging away up the road. Then despite his assertion of disbelief in things unseen, he again crossed himself and set about his duties. Here to his hand, was information, real news that would keep his clients upon the tiptoe of expectation. The worthy landlord had visions of increased trade, of a throng, thirsty alike for red wine and information about the mysterious stranger who appeared to be so deeply interested in the haunted Château of Merlains.

CHAPTER VII

AN ADVERTISEMENT IN THE "TIMES"

TOM BANNISTER whistled gaily as he strode out over the hardened surface of the road. The little breeze that blew down the hills was invigorating alike to mind and body. There was something in this adventure that was taking a firm hold upon him. When he had awakened that morning at the hotel in Louviers he had felt a few qualms, qualms that were fast disappearing from his mental outlook.

His acquaintance at the Préfecture had been all that could be desired. By his good offices Thomas Bannister had been allowed a free hand in the Rue des Archives and the man had left with copies of documents, some directly, some indirectly, bearing upon the Gressiers and their Normandy home. A night's work of sorting and re-sorting, of building and re-constructing, had resulted in a structure of truth cunningly cemented with lies that should bear the closest scrutiny. And yet, now that he was, as it were, embarked upon the adventure, the colossal dimensions of it almost made him afraid. In the course of his chequered career Mr. Thomas Bannister had played many parts, but of impersonation he

had always fought shy. He had put the temptation always from him, knowing well the snares and pitfalls of so deep a game. There are so many little things that one has to remember—small, inconsiderable trifles that can so easily bring tumbling about one's ears the most carefully constructed edifice. There was Flash Dickson—Bannister remembered only too well poor Dickson's Waterloo. Dickson had been so sure of his game that he had lived in his victim's shoes for three years, and then, when he had considered himself safe, had been bowled over by failing to remember—or to have ascertained—the colour of his supposed mother's eyes. Dickson was still in Dartmoor, and his fall had been a wonderful lesson to Mr. Thomas Bannister.

But, somehow, in the present case, things were different. There could be no thought of failure did he but keep his wits about him. Clearly, the estate of Merlains had become so hampered by the bindweed of litigation that a fresh claimant, especially one so prepared as was Bannister, would win through by sheer audacity. The lawyers, having sucked the château dry as an orange, would in all probability be content to let sleeping dogs lie rather than reopen a subject that might lead them into all manner of pitfalls. Added to this, Bannister had more than a superficial knowledge of history.

How many estates confiscated from *émigrés* had, after the fires of the Revolution had become dead ashes, fallen into the hands of those who had faith-

fully served the Convention? How many seats of the mighty had found plebeian masters? And so it had been during the Directory period, and even after the rise and fall of Napoleon and the accession of Louis XVIII. Those had been stirring times, when one never knew what the morrow would bring forth, and when the hand of man was against man, and a word to the authorities would remove an enemy from one's path more surely than could a dagger. Small wonder that title-deeds were lost in the turmoil of happenings, until possession became in very truth the proverbial nine-tenths of the law.

With his inborn gifts of deception, backed by the data and documentary evidence he had obtained, together with that which Hubert Carlairs would be able to provide him, Bannister's task should become as easy as falling off a log.

There is nothing that passes the miles away so successfully as the companionship of one's thoughts, especially such thoughts as those that occupied the mind of Thomas Bannister as he walked the Normandy roads to view his newly adopted ancestral home. In the smoke of the Laranaga he had lighted the man could weave alluring pictures of the future. This, he said, should be his last throw; it was time that he retired from the business while he still held his liberty. He would settle down to the evening of his days in the peace that Bannister candidly considered to be his right, his well-earned reward for many a year of toil. Myra would never know.

the means by which her uncle had made smooth for her the road of life. The things that, perhaps, in Myra's lonely moments had given her food for thought would in course of time fade from her memory. The explanations that she had from time to time asked for when some sudden upheaval of her uncle's fortune had sent them hot foot across a continent, the looks of inquiry with which the girl's grey eyes had met some sudden suggestion . . . all these things should be of the past, things to cause him no further heartburnings, no more sleepless hours. . . .

The man had left the high road and was now in the little lane that led towards Massey and the hamlet. A quarter of an hour's walking brought him to Merlains.

It must be Merlains, for surely there was no château other than this in the neighbourhood. An old lichen-covered wall ran for some two hundred yards beside the road, and in the centre a stone archway flanked by conical-roofed towers—towers that somehow reminded Bannister of the towers of the Conciergerie that he had looked at from the Pont Neuf, in Paris. Beyond the wall, showing above the leafless arms of the trees, a Mansard roof showed grey.

Warped as was the soul of the man, Bannister lacked nothing in appreciation, and he thrilled at the thought of possession. A little work, a little care, and Merlains would become a paradise upon

earth, a pleasaunce of rose gardens and per Light and laughter would fill the dignified old apartments, the noble stairway would resound again to the footsteps of guests. Ghosts of the past would peep forth behind doorways and arras, and flee away, glad that the old place was alive again. And the guests would be guests of Myra's choosing. No shadows from the under-world that had given Bannister his fortune would have place in Merlains. The little village that nestled over there, a cluster of red roofs in a dip in the hills, would have cause to bless the name of Bann . . . of Gressier. Myra should be the Lady Bountiful, and he . . . he would put aside the evil memories of the past and live life as it should be lived by a French country gentleman . . . a game of chess with the *curé*, Myra at the piano, the scent of the gardens coming in from the . . .

Mr. Thomas Bannister threw away the stump of his cigar, and with it his dreams. The experience of a thousand doubtful games had taught this man the folly and futility of counting broods before the hen had definitely finished her task with the eggs. There was work, much difficult work, to be done before he came into his kingdom, many difficult moments to be bridged over. He thought again of poor Dickson in Dartmoor. . . .

He regretted that it was no part of his programme to visit the château. He had deemed it hardly wise for him to go so far as an exterior view, but that had been necessary to his plans. When in the full-

ness of time he should enter the château it would be as a stranger, the inheritor of a place he had never seen, could never have seen. He would not be alone; perhaps there would be with him some lawyer, some eagle-eyed lawyer from Paris, ready to note any undue knowledge of the château. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing in such games as Mr. Thomas Bannister had set himself to play.

He took from his pocket a note-book, and with deft touch sketched an outline of the gateway, advancing close to note the details on the weather-beaten escutcheon sculptured upon the shield in the centre stone of the arch.

For perhaps half an hour he worked with his pencil, and each time he looked up from his sketch his eye, accustomed to minute inspections, took in some new detail. And when the little drawing was at last finished to his satisfaction, Thomas Bannister glanced at his watch and determined upon a closer inspection. That it was folly he was aware, but there could be little harm if he remained in the grounds and did not explore the interior of the château. The temptation to linger in the neighbourhood of a place so soon to be his was too strong.

The iron gates between the stone pillars were rusty and hung brokenly on the remains of their hinges. It needed but a touch to open them far enough to admit of the body of Mr. Thomas Bannister.

That gentleman found himself upon a broad,

gravelled pathway now given up to weeds and the untrammelled vegetation that had sent out its tendrils from the untended flower beds. On the lawns that led up to the lichen-stained stone balustrade of the terrace the grass grew rank and knee-high. But the intruder saw little of the desolation of the present, his eyes were busy with their pictures of the future.

Thomas Bannister was seeing the flower beds ablaze with all the colour of a glowing summer, the air about him was filled with the scent of roses and the music of bees. He saw the terrace swept clear of the dead leaves that clustered in little brown drifts in the crevices of the balustrade. He saw big wicker chairs and gaudy cushions and striped awnings, a silver tea service upon the garden table, and Myra bending over the cups. She was wearing a clinging gown of amber silk that toned wonderfully with the old grey walls of the house at her back. The long windows were open, and the soft lifting of the curtains in the summer breeze showed him the shadowy comfort of well-furnished rooms, the cool seclusion of a library. . . . Then Thomas Bannister pulled himself together with a little laugh at his dreamings.

Time, and to spare, for summer and roses and amber silk when his work was done. But summer was not yet. The grass stood rank, the flower beds a-tangle with the growth of years, and the little brown leaves, ghosts of last year, whispered and rustled dismally in the wind that came down from

the forest-clad hills. The oaks and beeches of the wood beyond the château threw up gaunt, leafless limbs towards the winter sun as though praying for strength to wait until the spring warmed the sap in their veins and bade them once more to live.

No, Thomas Bannister—your summer is not yet.

Save for the breeze and the rustling of the dead leaves the silence was unbroken as the man took careful survey of the château. The great door was locked, and for this the man was grateful. Otherwise it would have been hard indeed to resist the temptation to enter and wander to his heart's desire about the echoing corridors, peering into rooms with their half-hidden secrets of a wonderful past. But through the grime that covered the windows the man was permitted glimpses of rooms, big and lofty, of ceilings richly carved, and of stairways that led up into the gloom. For an hour Thomas Bannister paced the terrace and the weed-grown walks, absorbing detail and storing up in his memory any trivial thing that it would be well for him to know, and putting aside with unerring skill those which it would be dangerous for him to remember.

And, after the hour had passed, Thomas Bannister left the grounds of the Château of Merlains, and returned to the road and to his day dreams with a hand much strengthened for the coming fight.

At the Café du Dome he had his meal. The landlord had surpassed himself, and it was to his evident disappointment that his guest should show so little

inclination to talk. It had occurred to Bannister that he would have done better if he had not shown himself at the Café at all. But he had not considered that at the time, and the mischief being so far done it was well to leave it at that and to say as little as possible. So he contented himself with liberal payment and a request that the landlord should join him in the bottle of Volny, leaving old Jacques Botrelle with none but the most pleasant memories of the unexpected guest who had come in by the eight o'clock train and left by the four mail for Paris.

It was late when Thomas Bannister reached the Gare St. Lazare and walked slowly down to the Boulevards. He was tired and eager for the warmth of the cosy little flat in the Rue Richelieu, but circumstances were against enjoyment of it. The long journey from Louviers had given him time in which to map out his future programme, but had not been sufficient for him to fill in any but the barest of details. A night's rest would restore him; he had had a tiring day, and his brain was not at its best, not in a condition to answer satisfactorily any chance question that Myra might put to him. A clock over a shop in the Boulevard Haussmann told him that it wanted but fifteen minutes to midnight.

He must put in an hour somewhere and somehow before returning home. Myra had a most uncomfortable knack of sitting up for her uncle. It was

sweet of her to do so, of course and, had Bannister lived any life but the one he did, it would have been most gratifying. But to-night of all nights. . . .

He turned at the Place de l'Opéra, and sauntered slowly along the boulevard towards the Porte Saint Denis. At the Taverne Mazarin he took a seat at one of the tables and ordered a cognac, sitting there well protected from the wind by the glass screen, and watched the thinning crowd of pedestrians and the motors and fiacres on their way up to Montmartre. He waited there, smoking and sipping his coffee until a quarter to one, when, rising and paying the *garçon*, he crossed the road and turned into the darkness of the Rue Richelieu. The hour at the Mazarin had borne fruit.

To his relief the flat was dark and silent, and, after listening for a moment as he had done on that other night at Myra's door, he entered the study and switched on the light. A fire was burning cheerfully in the grate, and Mr. Thomas Bannister's slippers rested against the brass rail of the curb. On the table a plate of sandwiches and a decanter spoke eloquently of Myra's thought for her uncle. A little note left beside the plate wished him good-night, and hoped that he didn't mind her going off to bed. A rather dull play at the Odéon had given her a headache.

The hands of the Sheraton clock upon the mantelpiece had passed the half-hour after two when Thomas Bannister at last roused himself from the

reverie, in the deep-seated chair before the fire, that he had wearily fallen into upon his entrance. The train of thought that had suggested itself to him as he had sat sipping his cognac at the Café Mazarin had taken definite shape.

He poured himself out a glass of wine from the decanter and crossed to a little bureau that stood by the wall between the two small windows. He seated himself and drew towards him pen and paper. For some time he sat biting at the end of the quill, then, writing slowly, and with many a correction, he drew up an advertisement.

Late as was the hour, Mr. Thomas Bannister himself went out and posted the short letter which he had enclosed with the carefully worded advertisement. The envelope was addressed to—

“ AGONY COLUMN,

“ THE ‘ TIMES,’

“ PRINTING HOUSE SQUARE

“ LONDON.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUSE IN GROSVENOR GARDENS

UPON a morning in early February a young man stood at the window of the library of Sir Hector Carlairs's house in Grosvenor Gardens, stood with hands thrust deeply into pockets, looking out over the traffic to where, above the wall of Buckingham Palace Gardens, the trees showed leafless against the gloom of the winter sky.

The days that had passed since the year had opened so dramatically for him in Covent Garden had been anxious ones for Mr. Denis Carlairs, the nights sleepless and haunted by visions of his own imagination. The letter he had that morning received from Nora Marsden had already been read through twice and had but added to the load that was sitting, the blackest of black dogs, upon his shoulders. Moreover, the vista from the library window of No. 10A, Grosvenor Gardens, was one hardly calculated to dislodge the unwelcome canine visitor from his perch.

Omnibuses, roofed with a canopy of glistening umbrellas, ploughing their way through an inch or more of muddy slush; pedestrians passing like grey

ghosts, those on the opposite pavement hugging closely the meagre shelter of the high brick wall; the clinging blanket of wet February fog held the Metropolis in its chill embrace . . . deadening . . . depressing.

Denis turned from the window to the glowing comfort of the room. He drew a wide-armed leather chair up before the open hearth, and viciously poked the coals into a blaze. He was out of sorts, and both irritated and angry with himself. Also, he was angry with Nora.

He could understand, and he did not grumble at, the anxiety of the past few weeks so long as that anxiety was his and his alone. It was the natural outcome of his action, the price he had to pay for the unthinkable folly of that mad New Year's Eve. But with Nora it was another matter.

To say that a coolness had sprung up between the two young people since that early morning in Covent Garden would hardly explain the position. The girl was not one who would lightly blame a man for an act in which she had participated, but at the same time she was showing plainly that she had no desire to share in it. Nora was not angry, she was merely exasperated, and perhaps a little frightened, at finding herself a central figure in an affair that might at any time bring her into the unwelcome publicity of the police-court.

The fact that there had been no further developments in connection with the theft weighed not at

all with her. Nora was something of a fatalist and she knew within herself that the ball they had set rolling on New Year's Eve would not come readily to a standstill. Moreover, she was a girl of shrewd judgment, anything that was likely to retard her in her profession she was ready to fight tooth and nail. She knew well that such an ornament as that of the du Barry could not long be hidden—that, sooner or later, the thief would be tempted to part with his treasure, and once it had seen light the gem would be recognized by a score of dealers and experts. It cou'd only be a matter of time before the world would be poking its long nose into the affair and stirring up any mud that it could find. A chance word let fall by any of those concerned would set the papers agog and half the journalists of London running hot-foot to Whitehall. There was a spice of romance in the story and a lively controversy would ensue, a controversy that would bring views and opinions from historians, criminologists and jewel experts. Also, perhaps, Nora's nerves had not altogether recovered from the shock of that early morning in the market. There were times when she could still feel the grasp of those strong fingers as they had wrenched at her neck . . . still feel the chill of the stones as Denis had fastened the gleaming string about her neck in the vault of the bank.

True, Nora Marsden, as we have seen, was keenly alive to the uses of advertisement, and knew well that more than one actress had been sent sky-high

to prosperity by the theft of a jewel, but her case was vastly different. It is one thing to lose a jewel that is one's own, quite another to lose one that you have, to use but a mild term, borrowed. There would be one or two journals which would take a strong view of the part the girl had played in the adventure. And so Nora, having given the matter due consideration, decided that the sooner she cut away the entanglements that were beginning to bind her the better. She had written to Denis, and it was her letter that he was reading now for the third time as he sat before the fire in the library of Sir Hector's house in Grosvenor Gardens

"And so there is nothing else to do, is there?" the girl had written. "We have not to think only of ourselves. . . . I do not blame you for what you did, or if I blame you, I blame myself equally with you—or twenty times more. I should never have allowed you to do it. It is in these things that the woman should be stronger than the man. Auntie is worse to-day, and the doctor warns me against exciting her. I wonder what she would do if the thing became known . . . I think for the present it would be as well if we did not meet." . .

Denis crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it savagely into the heart of the coals. He rose and walked to the window.

Nora was selfish; he could read that in every line

of her three-page letter. The excuse of her aunt's illness did not deceive him. It was clear that the girl refused to be made a party to any unpleasant *dénouement* that might result from the mad escapade in which she had taken part, the adventure from which she had been willing to extract all the sweets and to throw the bitter upon any shoulders other than her own. When, as assuredly would be the case, the affair of the du Barry necklace became public property, Nora would take good care to be out of the ugly proceedings. They might interest her from a distance. She might even slip, heavily veiled, into the back bench of the court. That would be so like a woman.

The clock over the wide, oaken fireplace sent out ten sonorous chimes into the stillness of the room, and Denis started. Sir Hector would already be at his desk in Whitehall, a lesson in punctuality to the rising generation. The young man touched the bell and ordered the footman to call a taxi.

Perhaps it was the fog as much as Nora's letter that weighed upon the mind of Denis Carlairs as he stepped from the cab at the door of the bank. There had been a fog, he remembered, *that* night—*curse that night, anyway.*

If Denis had any premonition of impending trouble upon that February morning it was justified to the hilt within a quarter of an hour of his taking his seat at his desk. With Hubert he shared a room behind the main office and a little to the right of

Sir Hector's own private sanctum. This morning he was alone, Hubert being away upon one of his frequent visits to Paris, where the bank had a large *clientèle* among the British residents in the French capital. Denis had envied his brother's—for to the world Hubert and he were brothers—periodical jaunts, those little breaks in the monotony of the life at the bank that he himself would have so greatly welcomed. Such gifts seemed to the younger man to be wasted upon Hubert.

He leant back in his padded chair and lit a cigarette. On the days that Hubert was in London tobacco was taboo in the office, as being not consistent with the dignity of banking. Denis, in these days of comparative freedom, most heartily scoffed at the dignity of banking, and made the most of his time. And as he watched the smoke of his cigarette rise to the ornate Adam ceiling of the office his thoughts were busy.

Hubert, he said, would be poring over the books in the Rue Scribe. He would be poring over them all day and far into the night, oblivious to the siren call of the Boulevards. The younger man in the office in Whitehall smiled as he thought of Paris as he knew it—the long flaming line of the Boulevards, the cabarets and the cafés of Montmartre. He wondered that Hubert, knowing little or nothing of these delights, had been content to brave the terrors of sea-sickness to go so often to Paris. Why, it was only ten days ago that he was there . .

HOUSE IN GROSVENOR GARDENS III

Denis was called back to earth by the ringing of Sir Hector's bell.

The banker was not, as Denis had expected to see him, at his desk, but had drawn up an armchair to the fire, and was sitting looking thoughtfully at the leaping flames. He turned as the door opened.

Denis crossed the room and stood before Sir Hector. Something told him that a crisis had arrived, and that his depression of the morning had been both justified and prophetic.

"Sit down, Denis," and when the younger man was seated Sir Hector went on—

"Seen the *Times* this morning, Denis?"

"Not this morning. I glanced through the *Telegraph* at breakfast."

Sir Hector leant over and picked up a newspaper from his desk. He handed it across to the young man.

"What do you make of that?" The finger of the banker was pointing to a small paragraph on the front page. It read—

"GRESSIER.—*In the year 1792 a certain French nobleman deposited on trust a chest at a certain bank in London. The bank in question is requested to write to Armand Gressier, at 101, Rue Châteaudun, Paris. Full confidence on both sides.*"

The newspaper slipped from Denis's fingers and fluttered to the hearthrug. The young man recovered himself with an effort.

"Sudden—what? I wonder if it's genuine."

And while he spoke his mind was full of the terror of the thing, of all that the advertisement in the *Times* meant to him. For the moment his world seemed to stand still about him . . . in a little while it would come crashing down upon his head, leaving him an outcast . . . perhaps in a felon's cell.

Sir Hector sat for a moment without speaking, then he turned to Denis—

"Personally, I shall not be sorry to see the back of the white elephant in the vault downstairs. At the same time, I suppose we must look upon it as one of the romances of banking."

Denis did not answer. He heard his father but vaguely.

"A hundred and twenty years is a long time, Denis. It was a hundred-and-twenty years ago when young Gressier gave his charge into the hands of the Carlairs of that day. The bank was young then, Denis; my grandfather, the younger partner, would be about thirty years of age at the time."

Denis cleared his throat.

"What were the real details, again, sir?"

Denis had heard the story, knew it perhaps as well as Sir Hector, but he felt he might do worse than listen to its repetition. Sir Hector, he knew, loved the old romance, and the telling of it, as much as his ancestor had done.

"It was in seventeen ninety-two, Denis, the year

of the fall of the Tuileries. The news of that affair, as you may suppose, made considerable stir in England. My grandfather, who had heard the story from his father, spoke of a stranger coming here to the bank on an afternoon of a day in October, and of his being shown into this very room. The visitor was a well-set up man of about twenty-two, one of a devoted band of Royalist soldiers who had defended the Palace when it had been attacked by the mob. He had been wounded, he said, and had experienced considerable difficulty in making the passage of the Channel, as the coasts were watched day and night by the officers of the Convention.

"Lieutenant Gressier was in a hurry. He was, he told my grandfather, to return to Lewes by the night coach, and from there drive to Brighthelmstone, where a lugger was due to sail on the morning tide for Fécamp. The sole purport of this journey to London was to place in safe keeping the portable wealth, or part of it, belonging to a lady whom at first he was loath to name. My great-grandfather, however, pointed out to him that it would be better if they knew all. At last he told him that the lady for whom he was acting was no less a person than the notorious Madame du Barry, and that, apart from the title-deeds of an estate somewhere in Normandy, the chest contained many of the costly gifts bestowed upon du Barry by the doting old reprobate, Louis the Fifteenth. First and foremost, there was a necklace, a . . . what's wrong, Denis?"

The younger man drew his chair nearer the fire.

"A little cold, sir, that's all. Please go on."

"Well, documents were drawn up and all was made shipshape. Young Gressier was invited to dine with my grandfather, at his house in Kensington Gore. He refused, pleading an excuse that, his business over in London, he was anxious to get back to Paris. I have heard, however, that he changed his mind, and accepted an invitation to dine with Benjamin's nephew at Hampstead. Perhaps the young Frenchman thought that he would have a better time there than in the dull old mansion in Kensington Gore. Be that as it may, Jacob Carlairs called for him that night at the Golden Cross in the Strand only to be told that Gressier was not in the hotel.

"It was at first thought that he had again changed his mind and had, after all taken the night coach for Lewes, *en route* for Brighthelmstone and Fécamp. But his bill at the Golden Cross was unpaid and to the best of our knowledge young Gressier was never again seen."

Sir Hector paused for a moment and stirred the coals into a blaze.

"London in those days, Denis, was not the safe place it is now, and there were many pitfalls for the unwary. Also it has been handed down in the family that the night was one of fog, and this being the case anything might have happened to the unfortunate young man."

"And you never heard of him again?"

"Never. If he safely returned to Paris I think we would have heard. You know what it was like over there in the Revolution. A man of so distinguished a family as Gressier would have short shrift if he fell into the hands of the Terrorists. If he had not already handed over the receipt for the chest to the rightful owner, it is not likely he would speak at all. He would carry the secret with him to the guillotine rather than the treasure should fall into the hands of his enemies.

"And Madame du Barry, did you never hear from her?"

"Never. As you know, she was guillotined the next year—besides it was part of the bargain that we should keep her name to ourselves. This is the first time I've spoken of it. Only a Gressier had the right to claim the chest."

"But what happened?"

"What was always happening in those days, Denis. Later, our inquiries brought to light a rumour that a young fellow named Gressier, whether our Gressier or not I cannot say, took an active part in the defence of the dying monarchy. He was, so the rumour went, one of the intrepid band gathered together by the Baron de Batz, who tried to rescue the king on his way to execution. He was wounded in that affair, and for two days lay hidden in the Bois. Later he escaped to the frontier, to Metz. There he was supposed to have instigated one of the

more foolish of the attempts to rescue Marie Antoinette from the Temple. And here the rumour of this gentleman ceases."

"And his descendants?"

Sir Hector shrugged his shoulders.

"Inquiries brought to light nothing—that is, nothing definite. No doubt my ancestor could have found a claimant who had some ghost of a right to the chest, but it was hardly his place to speak. Perhaps more could have been found if my grandfather had gone to France at the time, but the relations between this country and France were not such as to allow of a visit without running a great risk. It was not until the storm had spent itself that he went to Paris. He found the city in a curious state, a sort of spring-cleaning after the Terror. The château in Normandy had, by legal juggling, got into the possession of some ruffian who had served Robespierre, a vulgar creature, who insulted my grandfather, and fearing that he might have to disgorge his ill-gotten gains, would give no information that might prove useful. In fact, I believe that my worthy ancestor had some considerable difficulty in escaping from France with a whole skin. There was a rumour that the only surviving member of the Gresham family emigrated to Canada . . . Quebec. Advertisements appeared in the Canadian journals for a year, in the *London Times*——"

"And now at the eleventh hour——"

"As you say, Denis, at the eleventh hour."

Sir Hector rose from the armchair and crossed to his desk. Opening a small drawer to the left of the row of pigeon holes he took from it a bundle of papers tied about with red tape. Selecting one, he returned to the fireside.

"Although the chest downstairs is anything but bulky, Denis, it is exceeding valuable. The necklace alone is worth a small fortune, and I see by this inventory—" he tapped the paper he held in his hand—"that there are many other jewels. Also, and this is perhaps less important at this date, there are the deeds for the estate in Normandy, Merlains the name is. Whether it would be worth while to attempt to dispossess the present owner after so long a lapse is for the lawyers to say. Look over the list, Denis."

The old man handed the paper across and Denis bent his head over it. He could see nothing but the necklace, the description of the jewel stood out in letters of fire. In a little while now, it seemed, his folly—or worse—would be discovered. . . . He raised his eyes and looked at the banker. Why should he not confess? Sir Hector had been to him more than a father and would be merciful, perhaps be able to show him a way out of his difficulty. But the suggestion died as soon as it was born, and if this was Denis Carlair's golden moment he let it pass. Apart from the blow to his integrity, Sir Hector would feel that other and more personal

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blow, the knowledge that the boy he had trusted had played him false.

Denis folded the paper and returned it to the banker. The old man took it and walking again to his desk rang his bell.

Denis, anxious to be alone with his thoughts, took this to be a sign that the interview was at an end. He rose and passed through to his own room. There he sat, his elbows upon the desk before him, staring dully at his still unopened letters. The clock hanging upon the grey-green expanse of wall above him, ticked aggressively. And in the young man's thoughts Sir Hector was uppermost.

Heavy as was the blow pending for Denis Carlairs, it was light to that awaiting the old man he had left at his desk in the next room. The integrity of the House of Carlairs was to Sir Hector as was the Holy Grail to Arthur's knights of old. It was a fetish, a thing to be defended with life itself, and now, in a few hours, the banker would be faced with the greatest shame that could fall upon him—a betrayal of trust. The full inventory of the contents of the chest, Denis had always known to be in existence, and it had been the duty of the auditor once a year to verify the contents of the boxes and safes in the strong room.

The young man rose from his seat and paced the carpet of the office. A fine repayment, that which he had prepared for the man who had been to him more than a father, to whose benevolence he owed

everything in life. Confession was useless, coming, as it would come, a month late, and only when he was faced with the consequences of his crime. Also there was Nora. . . .

Bitter as were his thoughts of the girl, not for one moment would he think of allowing her to share a trouble which his own foolhardiness had brought about. Even the confession he had thought to make became still more an impossibility when he considered Nora Marsden. But for her it would still be possible for him to go back to Sir Hector and throw himself upon the old man's mercy. Such a confession was better than leaving Sir Hector in his fool's paradise, a paradise from which the awakening would be so certain and so bitter.

But the letter he had that morning received from Nora had opened the eyes of Denis Carlairs. Upon the few occasions upon which they had met since that fatal opening to the New Year the man had noticed a certain difference in the girl. Gradually it had been borne upon him that Nora was a coward, and that she troubled her pretty head about nobody but herself. Although he would not admit it even to himself, he had a subconscious idea that any attempt to ask her to share his dilemma would meet with refusal; more, Nora might even, in fear for her growing reputation deny the escapade altogether.

He had carried the copy of the *Times* with him from Sir Hector's room, and now he re-read the advertisement that had come like a bolt out of the

blue into the quietude and dignity of Carlairs's bank:—

"GRESSIER.—In the year 1792 a certain French nobleman deposited on trust a chest at a certain bank in London. The bank in question is requested to write to Armand Gressier, at 101, Rue Châteaudun, Paris. Fullest confidence on both sides."

Denis cut the advertisement from the paper and looked up at the clock. An hour in which to attend to his correspondence, and it would be nearly lunch-time. Lunch, to him, at that moment, took the visionary form of a double whisky and soda. Afterwards he would go and see Nora; together they might be able to arrive at some decision that would prove helpful.

The hour's work gave Denis a more healthy frame of mind so far as the inner man was concerned, and it was with a more hopeful aspect that, about half past two, he left the Café Royal and hailed a taxi. Not that his outlook had changed one whit for the better—or, for the matter of that, for the worse—since his interview with Sir Hector, but a sole Colbert and a small bottle of Pommard provide rose-tinted spectacles even to those who look into the very dimmest of futures.

Any satisfaction that Denis Carlairs may have felt as the cab purred its way through the traffic of Leicester Square was quickly dispelled as he

faced Nora Marsden in the little sitting-room of her tiny flat in the by-street behind Lincoln's Inn. The girl received him with a smile, but it was a smile of the lips only, and it took but little perception to note the cold antagonism that shone behind the blue eyes.

She led the way through the tiny hall and into the drawing-room whose windows looked upon a dreary stretch of drab house-fronts and the leafless trees of a railed-in square. The man placed his hat and gloves upon one of the small tables that littered the room.

"I thought I would come and see you, Nora," he began.

"You have had my letter?"

Denis smiled a little bitterly.

"Yes, Nora, I had your letter. It came this morning. I am afraid I have not got it with me to refer to . . . in fact I burned it as soon as I had read it. It was not what one would call a nice letter, Nora."

The girl did not answer. She had crossed to the window and now stood looking down into the square.

"It was your letter that brought me here, Nora. Not to blame you or plead with you, or to grouse at my luck. It was my fault from beginning to end and I'm not going to birk the consequences. But, as I have said, it wasn't a nice letter to receive."

For an instant the girl turned to him, the look in

her eyes telling him that she had steeled herself to the performance of a disagreeable task.

"Wasn't it? And what do you expect? You could hardly think that I was going to write to you and thank you for New Year's Eve, to go on my knees in gratitude for dragging me into the rotten affair. Perhaps you would be surprised if I told you that I have not slept a night through since our little adventure. Auntie is always asking what it is that is worrying me and I don't know what on earth to tell her. I . . ."

"I'm sorry, Nora."

"And what's the good of being sorry? Sorrow won't mend matters, it won't put the necklace back in the place you took it from."

"I'd give ten years of my life if it could."

There was something in the tone of the man's voice that put a period upon Nora's recriminations. Something had happened, some new aspect of the affair had arisen. She looked hard at Denis.

"What is it? . . . Has anything happened?"

The man laughed bitterly.

"Only that the whole ghastly affair will be in all the papers within a few weeks."

She leant forward.

"The police?"

"Not yet. That is a little pleasure in store for me. No, this is merely the opening into the road that leads to Bow Street and Dartmoor. To be precise, the chest that has been lying sleeping in our vaults

for over a century is to be dragged into the light of day. In other words, fate has chosen this particular time for a claimant to arise."

"A claimant?"

"Yes. A nice little joke, isn't it, on the part of Mister Fate. Looks as if he had been waiting for a favourable opportunity to launch his bolt."

"Tell me all about it."

For answer Denis drew from his pocket the cutting he had taken from the *Times*, the "agony" relating to Gressier and the Rue Châteaudun in Paris. He took a cigarette from the box on the table, and lighting it leant back watching the face of the girl as she read. Nora went through it twice, then handed it back with a wry smile.

"And what are you going to do about it? What are you going to say when they open the box and find the most valuable thing in it gone?"

There was no disguising the anxiety in the girl's voice. Again Denis told himself that Nora did not care who sank so long as she could keep her own fair head above water.

"That's partly why I ran in to see you. Women are rather smart at getting out of these messes. Can't you suggest something, Nora?"

"But . . . I don't see what it's got to do with me."

Nora was still staring down into the dingy square and twisting the tassel of the blind-cord between her nervous fingers. When at last she spoke it was slowly,

and over her shoulder. There was in her voice an echo of the Nora he had known before this affair had come to separate them.

"You . . . you won't bring me into it, will you, Den?"

A moment's silence, then—

"No, Nora, I won't bring you into it. I'm not that particular brand of cad. Lord only knows what I will do."

"Perhaps they won't suspect. After all, there is nothing that points to you. No one saw us go to the bank except that policeman, and he won't give it another thought. When is this precious Mr. Gressier coming to take possession?"

"Any day after the preliminaries have been satisfactorily arranged between the parties. A week at the outside is all we've . . . I mean all I've got in which to think out a scheme."

"But will he know what the chest contained—has he a list?"

"Very likely not. But the bank has, and that's more than enough for me. Only Hubert and the gov'nor and myself know the pass-word for the combination lock of the strong room."

"And why should they suspect you rather than Hubert?"

Denis's laugh was quite merry.

"Suspect Hubert? Why Sir Hector would as soon think of suspecting the Bishop of London. You've never met Hubert, Nora. Hubert is one of

the precious things of the world that are without spot or blemish. Hubert is one of those teetotal, non-smoking, white hen's chicks that never go astray for an inch off the beaten track. The Guv'nor might hesitate before he accuses me, he might even think he's walked in his sleep and done it himself, but suspect Hubert . . . never. I think he trusts me implicitly, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, two from three leaves one . . . that's all. And I'm that one."

There was silence in the little room for a few moments. Then—

"If I can help you, Denis, I will. You know that, don't you? In the meanwhile —"

"Meanwhile?"

"Oh, don't make it so hard for me to say. I mean that just for the time being, until this affair has blown over, don't you think it would be as well if we ——"

The man rose from his chair and took up his hat and gloves.

"All right, Nora, you need not say it. I know what you mean. You think it better that we should be strangers while this is hanging over my head. You need not take it to heart so much, Nora. I knew what was in your mind when I read your letter. That's why I burnt it. As I said just now I'm not going to beg or whine or grouse at my luck. I might make a very impressive speech all about women and the first breath of adversity—but I'm

not going to do it. Besides, I think you are quite right."

"I know I'm right, Denis. There's a chance of a lead in the No. 1 Company that goes out next month. It's the chance of a lifetime, a new play that may come to London later. And while we are on the subject of the necklace, I might ask you to remember that I begged you to put it back that night in the vault."

Denis nodded.

"You did, Nora. Oh, I was mad."

She noted the bitterness in his face and for a moment it looked as though she would relent and take her place at his side in the battle that was coming to him.

"I'm a selfish little beast, Den . . . I can only tell myself that it would do you no good if I did come in . . . I . . . I . . . think you had better go, Den . . . I'm going to cry."

The man turned to the door

"Good bye, Nora."

She held out a little hand to him. She would have kissed him if he had asked her to do so, but he did not ask her and so the fair head was kept turned to the window where it remained until the figure of Denis Carlairs had rounded the corner into the square. And when he had passed from her sight, Nora Marsden did what she said she was going to do . . . she sank upon the cheap little sofa and cried as though her heart would break

There were at the corner of the square some iron railings containing what had once been a garden attached to an old brick mansion that had long since been converted into solicitors' offices. Against these railings a man was leaning, a man of about twenty-five, thin and emaciated, and dressed quietly in dark clothes that, like the houses around him, had once seen better days. Hardly the type of man who would use taxis, he had, nevertheless, driven up but a moment after Denis Carlairs, and had watched that young man enter the block of flats—also he had watched until he came out. To be precise, he had not lost track of Mr. Denis Carlairs since he had left the office in Whitehall. The double entrances of the Café Royal had for a moment given him cause for anxiety, until he had remembered that even in a Regent Street restaurant one can obtain light refreshment at a reasonable figure and incidentally watch both doors.

It would seem now, however, that his watching of the young banker had temporarily come to a close. Ever since he had seen Denis enter the block of flats he had not ceased to wonder. Kingsbere Mansions was the last place that he had expected his quarry would lead him to, and the destination of Denis's taxi had given him pause. It was as though he had come to a knot in a carefully prepared programme.

For a few moments after the banker had left the square the man stood where he was, his eyes fixed

on the ground and his lips mumbling at the end of an unlighted cigar. Then, perhaps because the corner of Lincoln's Inn Fields is no place to linger on a bitterly cold day in winter, he sauntered towards Holborn, where, at one of the many hostelries that thoroughfare can boast, he partook of an inexpensive but spirituous lunch. Then, as if he had come to a decision, he returned to the square and to Kingsbere Mansions.

He did not give so much as a glance at the direction board in the lobby, but running up the stairs knocked lightly upon the door of the flat occupied by Miss Nora Marsden. He even went so far, there being no answer to his summons, as to turn the handle of the door.

The time that had elapsed since Denis had left had allowed the little actress to finish her cry and wipe away the tears. It had not allowed, however, time enough to remove their traces. She looked up from the desk where she had been writing. The pen dropped from her hand and she gave a strangled cry—

" You—Ronald ? "

The man addressed as Ronald laughed as he drew a chair towards the fire.

" Yes, Nora, me ; and devilish thirsty."

CHAPTER IX

HUBERT GETS A SURPRISE

THE table laid for dinner in the house in Grosvenor Gardens shone, a tiny oasis of radiance, in the shadowy richness of the dining-room. A fire burnt brightly upon the wide open hearth and picked out high lights upon the massive furniture and the gilded frames of the portraits that hung upon the red walls.

The table itself had been drawn up near the fire and was laid for three. One of the three was standing upon the white skin rug, a cigarette between his fingers, his eyes fixed staringly upon the gleaming silver and glass on the table. For once in his life Hubert Carlairs was distinctly nervous.

It is an accepted fact that evildoers invariably leave behind them some trace of their misdeeds. Be they never so careful there would seem to be some imp of perversity sitting upon their shoulders, watching for the inevitable step that will prove the wrongdoer's undoing. Hubert Carlairs had gone over so carefully the details of his plan that those very details had lost their true perspective in his reckoning; little things that had kept him awake a whole night would appear trivial in the light of

morning, and would retire, only to make room for a fresh army of details which, in their turn, worried Hubert almost to death.

The coming dinner with Denis and his father was not alluring to him. Only that morning he had left Paris, where he had spent the whole of the previous night in earnest consultation with Bannister. He had reached Charing Cross at five and taken a cab to the bank, where an hour's work had awaited him. Now, at eight o'clock he felt in anything but the mood to play a game as deep as the one he had set himself to play.

Hubert was showing, somewhat, in his face the stress through which he had passed. The engineering of so colossal a fraud as that he was working with Thomas Bannister is no light task for the most hardened criminal. Wrongdoer as Hubert might be, his had usually been the task of watching and financing rather than doing; and to find himself suddenly in the toils of a great conspiracy was trying to the utmost his none too strong nerves. True, in Paris he had gained much confidence from his interview with Bannister, the master mind had been one upon which to lean for comfort and the unravelling of many a knotty point. He had been filled with admiration of the way the elder man had handled the affair. Bannister had seemed to court difficulties rather than evade them; he seemed to take an unholy pleasure in raising obstacles to success, evidently for the pure delight of surmounting them.

Hubert had come back to London from their final interview primed to the very teeth in detail, and it was not until he awaited his father in the dining room in Grosvenor Gardens that he felt the first qualm. He dreaded some sudden question, some unconsidered remark and the fact that Bannister had warned him against such traps as these made him fear them the more. . . . And then his thoughts were cut off by the entrance of the two others of the party.

Sir Hector and Denis came into the room together and the meal commenced and progressed to general conversation. Only when the servants had left the room and coffee had been served did Sir Hector mention the subject that was uppermost in the minds of all of them.

"And now, Hubert, tell me what you make of the advertisement. You tell me you saw it on the boat as you came over."

"Yes, father, and it gave me a good deal to think about, I can assure you."

"You think it genuine?"

Hubert shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? Genuine or not, it is impossible to overlook it. The thing must be answered to-night."

"I rang up Printing House Square to-day."

Hubert looked up sharply.

"And they said——?"

"That the advertisement came through an agent

in Paris—101, Rue Châteaudun is an agency, it appears. They will make further inquiries if I wish it. I think I'll leave the details of the answer to you, Hubert."

"Rather a pity, isn't it, that it was not a day earlier."

"Why, Denis?"

Only that Hubert could have looked the matter up on the spot. An inquiry agent could have traced out the advertiser and let us know his pedigree, as it were. A letter is a difficult thing to write—it is not at all certain from the wording of the advertisement whether or no the man even knows our name. He mentions vaguely 'a certain bank in London.'"

Sir Hector lit a fresh cigarette.

"You're right, Denis, and yet the thing seems plausible upon the face of it. After all, it's entirely a matter of what evidence this man can bring forward. If, by any chance, he has picked up a smattering of the story only, we can soon bowl him over and put the police on to him. You'll be careful how you answer him, Hubert?"

"I'll simply say, I think, that the writer is requested to send further particulars. If he's straight he'll send them fast enough."

Denis broke in.

"Why not run back to Paris, Hubert, and see the fellow? Say you are acting for the bank."

Hubert raised his eyes. In spite of the journey he had just completed nothing would suit him better,

and he was grateful to Denis for the suggestion. He was already feeling acutely the strain of the conversation, and he felt that if he could but have another half-hour with Thomas Bannister it would act as a tonic to his nerves and admit of a better grip being taken on the situation. He needed badly the touch of the master hand.

The old banker broke the silence.

"I'm afraid, Hubert, the bank can't spare you. You have had two hurried journeys on top of one another, and you're looking a bit seedy. Besides, I'm not as young as I was, and there are many things I have put aside to await your return."

Sir Hector stopped for a moment and glanced from one to the other of the young men.

"Denis might go to Paris. In a case like this a little espionage is permissible. Denis can find out the sender of the advertisement. Why, bless my soul, Hubert, you are seedy . . . you're all white."

Hubert took a brace on his nerves.

"Not at all, father. Let's go into the library; the letter must be written without delay."

And as Hubert Carlairs led the way from the room, he would have given half his future years for ten minutes with Thomas Bannister—and a quarter of them for a brandy and soda. But to Hubert Carlairs, spirits were unknown—in his father's house.

CHAPTER X

ROBERTS

SIR HECTOR had, of late years, gone so far against the code of self-denial upon which he considered he had built up his fortune to allow himself the solace of an after dinner cigar, and he now sat in the wide-seated armchair before the library fire enjoying the first few aromatic inhalations of a choice Laranaga. Hubert, the affair on hand uppermost in his mind, had already seated himself at the desk that stood between the two windows and was jabbing aimlessly at the blotting pad before him. Denis, with a view to avoiding a *tête-à-tête* with Sir Hector and, perhaps, with a further idea of keeping a watch upon the composition of a letter that was to him big with importance, took up a strategic position upon the corner of the desk.

Both the young men were anxious to get the matter over and done with and yet they were loath to make a beginning. So long as their father sat in silence with his cigar there was leisure to think and both Hubert and Denis had much to keep them busy in this respect.

Had he dared, Hubert would have proposed that

the letter be written in the morning from the bank's premises in Whitehall, but like most evil-doers he was inclined to be somewhat over cautious. Perhaps, when the imposture had assumed bigger proportions, when each incident connected with it came beneath the microscope of investigation, such a suggestion upon his part might look black against him. Clearly his game was to acquiesce without demur in whatever Sir Hector wished, trusting to his sharp-witted partner to see the matter through.

"I think I would use the plain paper, Hubert. Just a formal note and as vague as possible. Merely say that the writer has seen the advertisement in to-day's *Times* and, as a preliminary, would like to get into touch with the advertiser. We don't want him to know that the man he will meet is Denis, or that he is connected in any way with the house except as their representative in this affair. I wouldn't call at the address in the Rue Châteaudun, Denis, but make an appointment, say for Friday, at twelve o'clock in some public spot in Paris. I don't believe in going behind closed doors when one is investigating things that are hidden and perhaps a little suspicious. Eh, Hubert?"

"I reckon Denis can look after himself, father. . . . But perhaps it would be as well. Where shall we say, Denis?"

The younger man smoked thoughtfully for a few moments.

"Let's say the Taverne Mazarin. I'm not often in Paris, worse luck, but I always lunch there when I am. Twelve o'clock at the table set in the window. He can't miss that, and we can have our little say with half Paris buzzing about our ears."

For a little while there was no sound in the library save the scratch of Hubert's pen as he wrote and the sonorous ticking of the steel-faced clock upon the mantelpiece. And as he wrote Hubert's mind was busy.

He had in the writing of the letter but one thought—that he should convey in some manner the information that the man whom Bannister would meet at the Mazarin would be Denis Carlairs, and so put Thomas Bannister upon his guard. There was something more than disturbing in the idea that his fellow conspirator should walk into the trap handicapped by any lack of knowledge. He was a little surprised at Sir Hector's suggesting a scheme that had in it even the suggestion of deceit, but perhaps the old banker, wise in his generation, scented something not quite above board in the advertisement and had decided to meet guile with guile.

If only Denis would leave his perch upon the corner of the desk for a moment, just to allow of time for the slipping within the envelope of two words of warning. The letter itself was quite out of the question for the eyes of the younger man

followed the pen in its every word. There was nothing suspicious in his act, nothing to which Hubert could take exception. After all, the letter was the common property of the three of them.

And so the message that told the man waiting in Paris that an agent of the bank would meet him at the Taverne Mazarin at twelve noon on the following Friday was sealed and dispatched. Hubert made a final effort to dominate the situation by the suggestion that he should himself take the letter to Charing Cross, but Sir Hector waved the idea aside. It was some days since he had had a talk with his son, and there were matters connected with the bank's business about which he wished to consult him.

Hubert rose from the desk after he had watched the servant leave the room with the letter, his mind filled with the gravest forebodings as to the future. For good or for bad the die was cast, the affair now rested in hands other than his own. Bannister could be relied upon to play the cards that came to his hand, and he had the satisfaction of at least knowing that there could be no doubt as to the writer of the letter. Bannister knew Hubert's handwriting as well as he knew his own. Anything that the letter failed to tell he would well understand could not be told and he would take measures of safety. And so Hubert Carlairs laid healing balm upon the anxiety of his racked nerves.

Denis no less than Hubert had his misgivings.

But his nature was more superficial than that of his foster-brother, more ready to take what the gods gave without question. He slipped down from his perch on the desk and crossed to the fire, taking a cup from the table upon which the coffee set was placed. There was something in this sudden journey to Paris that pleased him mightily. Always, he had been fond of Paris and he was not going to let any dark thoughts mar the pleasurable anticipation of his coming trip. Behind his mind was ever the knowledge that, although his scrape might land him in troubled waters, his conscience was clear and he had intended no wrong. If the worst came to the worst, Sir Hector would hardly prosecute, he would both for his own sake and the sake of the bank's good name keep the affair out of the courts, even if it meant the colonies and social death for the man he had adopted.

And so Denis allowed his thoughts to run pleasantly upon Paris. This was Tuesday; with a little arrangement he might leave London the next night, so as not to rush matters before the momentous meeting with the stranger on the Friday. After all, it was unheard-of good fortune that he was going to be allowed a private view, as it were, of his antagonist. Perhaps the man was an impostor and the credit of unmasking him might easily fall to the share of himself, an off-set to any possible trouble in the future. If, on the other hand, the man's credentials were beyond question

and the disappearance of the necklace but a matter of days—well perhaps it would be as well in that event for him to have the width of the channel between the wrath of Sir Hector and himself. After all, a confession can be as easily written as spoken—and the colonies can be reached from Havre as easily as from Liverpool. Also, social extinction is more easily borne abroad than at home.

He listened idly to the conversation between Hubert and his father, mortgages and overdrafts and sundry items of the business in Whitehall. This was an evening after the baronet's own heart, a warm fireside, a cigar and his boys for company. He asked Hubert many questions as to the business of the Paris branch, inquiring after clients he had known and not seen for years. In many cases he did not wait for an answer, which perhaps was just as well, because, although his hearer's thoughts were indeed in Paris, they were certainly not with the clients of Carlairs's Bank.

With the departure of the letter Hubert felt as though the battle, or rather the first engagement in a long campaign had in a measure gone against him. The struggle for the moment was beyond him. In his mind he followed the progress of the envelope that had but a moment since left his hands. . . . Its journey to the coast, its passage across the channel, its arrival in Paris, where, in the morning, Thomas Bannister would call for it in the Rue Châteaudun, and so enter the trap that

had been baited for him. A thousand things were passing through his brain. If only he could go to Paris in the place of Denis. The thought of Banister and his feather-headed foster-brother lunching together without either of them being aware of the other's identity was torture to him. The vista, as Hubert Carlairs was seeing it, bristled with snares and pitfalls. . . .

His father was speaking.

"There are many things I want to go into with you in the morning, Hubert. That Hartmoor mortgage came up for the third time while you were away and his lordship had to be put off again. His solicitor is coming to Whitehall on Thursday. . . ."

There was no answer from Hubert and Denis glancing in his direction saw that the man had slid somewhat into his chair. The arms hung pendulously over the chair rests and Hubert's face showed white in the soft glow of the electric bulb cluster above him. . . . He ran forward in time to raise his foster-brother's head and loosen his shirt at the neck before Hubert with a little sigh crumpled up over the arm of the chair and slid shapelessly to the floor. Sir Hector knelt and felt for his heart.

"He's all right, I think . . . I was a fool to worry him with business to-night. He had a bad crossing to-day, he told me. And yet I've never known Hubert to faint. Touch the bell for Roberts and

tell him to help carry his master to his room. Then ring up Dr. Hanning. . . ."

It was high noon when Hubert Carlairs again awoke to the world, a world in which he was evidently regarded as an invalid. It was his own room in Grosvenor Gardens, there could be no doubt as to that, but it was a room changed under the misguided attentions of the housekeeper into an imitation hospital ward. True, he was feeling anything but fit, and for the moment he found it a matter of some difficulty to arrange into sequence the events that had led up to this *dénouement*. He remembered his return from Paris, also he remembered the dinner with Denis and his father . . . then the letter to Bannister came into his mind bringing with it a chill apprehension of something wrong. He did not remember having said good night to Sir Hector or to Denis. . . . How long, he asked himself, had elapsed since that fateful letter had been written?

He raised himself upon his elbow and glanced about the room. The small silver and enamel clock upon the mantelpiece showed that it was half-past twelve. From beyond the shaded windows he could hear the rattle of the traffic in the Gardens, and, below stairs, the movement of servants about their household duties. There was beside his bed a small table, but, upon it, instead of the book and night-light which as a rule greeted his awakening,

there now stood a vase of flowers, a medicine bottle containing a pink liquid, a thermometer and other paraphernalia of the sick room. A fire burnt in the grate and a wicker chair upon the seat of which was thrown a morsel of half finished embroidery spoke to the recent departure of the feminine element. The man reached across to the table and took up a small bell.

He smiled up into the strange face that a moment later was bending over the bed. He must have been ill indeed for Sir Hector to have sent for a nurse . . . ill, and perhaps, delirious, babbling to this stranger all manner of things that might one day be remembered to his undoing. In fear and trepidation he put the question that he knew would have to, sooner or later, be answered. The reply reassured him somewhat.

"Last night, Mr. Carlairs. You fainted downstairs in the library. They tell me you had a bad crossing during the day. Sea-sickness sometimes takes a deal of shaking off. . . . The doctor will be here at two o'clock."

"But nurse, I'm going to get up."

The woman shook her head and smiled.

"They all say that, but we know better. Sir Hector left strict instructions that you were to obey Dr. Hanning in all matters. You will take your medicine now, Mr. Carlairs."

The man in the bed made a wry face as the nurse picked up the bottle containing the pink fluid.

"If that is the order of the day I suppose I must," he paused for a moment, and then put another question the answer to which must be faced.

"I have been a good patient, nurse?"

"Perfect. Really there was no need to send for me, but Sir Hector was anxious. You have slept like a top since last night."

"Good. I was afraid that I might have been delirious or something silly . . . utter rot one talks when one is like that. . . . What hateful concoction is that which Hanning has had made up for me?"

He took down the draught and turned on his pillow, anxious that the nurse should not see the relief that showed upon his face at her answers. He closed his eyes and strove to gather together the tangled web of his thoughts. Things were, after all, not much worse than they had been last night, although, in all conscience, they had been bad enough then. This was Wednesday and the letter would, by this time, in all probability be in Bannister's hands, an event that in any case he would have been powerless to prevent. A telegram, however, would save the situation and place his fellow conspirator upon his guard. Bannister must at all cost be warned that the man he would meet on Friday at the Mazarin would be Denis so that he could lay his plans and act accordingly.

"Is that clock right, nurse?"

The woman nodded.

"Do you know Roberts?"

"That is your man, is it not, Mr. Carlairs?"

"Yes. I wonder if you would send the servant for him."

"He left the house an hour ago, Mr. Carlairs. Sir Hector sent him down to Guildford. Dr. Hanning did not like the look of you this morning and he wants to get you down among the pines."

Hubert Carlairs sat up. There was something in all this that he did not understand. True, he had fainted in the library, he remembered that now, but surely there was no necessity for a nurse and for his being packed away down into the country. Either Hanning or the old fusser that he had always taken him to or else he had been lying, in spite of what the nurse had told him, there in bed for perhaps a week or more. And yet he did not think that that was the case.

Than Roberts there was no one whom he could trust, he and he alone could have been sent with the telegram for the Rue Châteaudun that might prove his salvation. To give it into the hands of any of the other servants would be to court disaster. Now, under the most favourable conditions, he could not get a wire to Paris in time to catch Bannister when he called at the agency for his letter. And having had the letter he would look for no further communication and Hubert's wire might lie in the pigeon-hole in the office to come to light, perhaps

long after, in the shape of evidence against the sender.

And so Hubert Carlairs could do nothing—nothing but lie there and think and take the medicine Dr. Hanning had made up for him. The thoughts that came to him were not pleasant ones, and, like all unpleasant thoughts, they refused to be lightly dismissed.

All through that afternoon when, dressed and sitting in an easy chair, he awaited the coming of the motor, all through the dusk as, berugged and muffled, he reclined in the luxurious limousine as it sped down to his father's Surrey home, his thoughts and mind-pictures were with him. He had had the idea of stopping the car and sending off a wire himself to the flat in the Rue Richelieu, but he had restrained his inclination. To his disordered imagination the telegram had become a bogey—evidence in the future and little real good in the present. Besides, Bannister in his new rôle of Gressier might not live in the Rue Richelieu as he had done before, and the wire would be returned to the sender.

The thought that worried Hubert the most was the thought of Thursday and of the *déjeuner* at the Mazarin. Bannister and Denis together, both men of the world, with a taste for the vinous delights of the table—what might not happen? For Bannister he had little fear, wine could do little to

loosen that carefully ruled tongue, but with Denis it was a vastly different matter. Hubert felt that he was impotent, that he was doomed to watch a game in which he had a great stake, but no hand in the play.

And yet as the car raced along the Portsmouth Road, past village and copse and through sleepy little townlets, he was busy with his second line of defence. All was not yet lost. A bold stroke and the situation was saved. The great car was all too slow—another hour and he would be with Roberts.

It was all but dark when at last the car slid cautiously down the hilly High Street of Surrey's county town, and turning took the Godalming Road. A few minutes later Roberts was assisting his master to alight.

"A bad night for an invalid, Mr. Hubert. Dinner will be served at half-past seven, sir. Sir Hector will be in on the seven-ten. He asked you not to trouble to dress, Mr. Hubert."

"Right, Roberts. No, I'm fit enough to walk upstairs alone. I want you in my room presently. I'll ring."

"Very good, sir."

Hubert Carlairs slowly ascended the stairs and entered a room at the back of the house upon the second floor. It was a large room with a big bay window looking out over the Hogsback. For a

moment the man did not switch on the light but sat in the armchair before the cheerful fire, thankful that for the first time that day he could revel in the luxury of being alone. Perhaps, after all, the forced inactivity had given a much needed rest to his brain, and, indeed, during the latter stages of the journey from town a plan had come to him that should in great measure dispel his difficulties. But there was little time to lose if that plan were to be put into execution.

He rose from the comfortable embrace of the chair and took from his wardrobe a long dressing-gown of camel's hair, and, fastening this about him, walked to the window. It was a wretchedly depressing evening and already, although it wanted a quarter to five, it was nearly dark. The outlook from this upper room of Horton Towers was desolate in the extreme, a flat stretch of common land cut in two by the railway, and, across the Peasmarsh, with its bogs and few scattered farms the dark ridge of the Hogsback showed against the darkening sky. The glass of the windows was already blurred with the first drops of the coming storm and a newly risen wind was moaning among the leafless trees in the gardens below. Hubert shivered and switched on the electric lights. He let the blind down with a rattle and turning back into the room took his seat at a small bureau that stood at the foot of his bed.

For a few minutes he sat with the pen in his hand at a loss how to word the letter he had in his mind. Then, as inspiration came to him, he quickly covered two sheets and after reading them placed them in an envelope and sealed them with his signet ring. Then, returning to his chair before the fire, he leant forward and pulled the bell rope.

"Come in. Ah, Roberts, that you?"

"You said if you rang, sir——"

"Quite right, Roberts. Come in and close the door. Better turn the key, I think."

The man who had entered at his master's bidding paused a moment in surprise. A look, somewhat of fear, crossed his face as he turned and locked the door. He was a man of rather handsome features but decidedly unprepossessing. His actions as he left the door and stood at attention beside Hubert's chair were typical of the man; in all his movements, all his goings and comings, Andrew Roberts went about his business or his pleasure in a manner calculated to inspire suspicion rather than trust. Many a wordy war had taken place between the baronet and his son of which Roberts had been the theme. Neither Sir Hector nor Denis liked Andrew, and in not a few cases the departure of other servants had been traced indirectly to a quarrel in which Mr. Hubert's man had been upheld by his master. But Hubert had been adamant. Roberts had been with him three years, he pointed

out, and had served him faithfully—what excuse had he for sending the man out into the street without a character?

Excellent sentiments these . . . but we may perhaps gain a clearer insight into the reason of them and into the relations existing between master and man if we glance for a moment through the closed door of that upper room in Horton Towers.

"Sit down, Roberts . . . there is a little job I want you to tackle."

The man bowed. In every way he was at Mr. Hubert's service.

"You know Paris as well as most men, don't you Roberts?"

Roberts smiled. He had accompanied his master more than once to France and his own personal knowledge of Paris, or rather the underworld of that city, was by no means inconsiderable.

"Good sailor, Roberts?"

"Fairly good, sir."

His master gave a glance towards the window against which the rain was now beating a very tattoo.

"A dirty night in the Channel. . . ."

The well trained face of the servant betrayed a moment's surprise.

"Do I understand that you wish me to travel to Paris to-night, sir?"

" Good guess, Roberts. It's absolutely necessary." Hubert glanced at his watch. " There's a train from Guildford at six-thirty. Rogers shall drive you to the station. You're not very pally with Rogers, are you? "

" We don't hit it quite, sir."

" Just as well. He won't ask any awkward questions as to where you are going. I don't want you to breath a word to a soul. Don't trouble to pack. Buy a bag and a few things in London and get the boat train from Charing Cross."

There was silence for a few minutes, then Hubert spoke again—

" I've always found you discreet, Roberts, and this isn't the first job I've asked you to do for me. I expect absolute service, that's why I pay you a salary three times as big as any other man would get, and . . . why I always fight your battles for you with the other servants."

" I always serve you faithfully, sir."

" Yes. And why? I think we understand one another and we are in the same boat to the end of the chapter. One false step from you and you know where we both will be. I, turned out of house and home in a minute, and you . . . I suppose after I send a certain paper to Scotland Yard, that you will retire for a few years into one of His Majesty's prisons. . . ."

" I do not think there is any need, Mr. Hubert,

for you to remind me of . . . of . . . past indiscretions."

Hubert laughed.

"My dear Roberts, there is nothing further from my thoughts than to hurt your feelings. At the same time it's necessary to let the horse know that there is a curb. It's not a bit of good after he's got the bit between his teeth and has bolted. You see what I mean, in that case both the horse and the rider come croppers: you, Roberts, being the horse, and me the rider."

"I quite understand, sir. I would suggest that there is not much time if you have many instructions to give me. Rogers must get the car at the door by six."

Hubert handed the man the letter he had written.

"The matter is perfectly simple. As I said, you catch the boat train at Charing Cross and should reach the Gare du Nord by six in the morning. Take a cup of coffee at the station and then get a fiacre and ask the man to drive you to the Rue Richelieu, number nineteen. They are flats at that number with a concierge at the door. I don't want you to go up, I only want you to make sure from the man that a Mr. Thomas Bannister is in his rooms. When you have made sure, give the concierge the letter and a five-franc tip on the understanding that Bannister has the letter within an hour. There is

no need for you to see Mr. Bannister, you understand, Roberts."

"I understand, sir."

"A point you must remember, Roberts, is in case Mr. Bannister has left the flat. In that event do not leave the letter but bring it back to me. It's perfectly clear, and I don't think for a moment that he has left. In all probability he will be in bed . . . Here's ten pounds, Roberts, and. . ."

"Yes, Mr. Hubert?"

"Only that Mr. Denis is in Paris. He may even be crossing to-night for all I know. He must not see you and it's for the same reason that I don't want Bannister to see you either. You'll understand that all in good time. When you leave the Rue Richelieu you have my full permission to do yourself well at my expense in Paris so long as you return that night by the Newhaven route from the Gare Saint Lazare. The train leaves about nine and till that hour I want you to keep to the other side of the Seine. You knew the Latin Quartier in your salad days, didn't you . . . perhaps you may find some of your pals. Mr. Denis won't be that side of the river anyway. All clear?"

"Quite, Mr. Hubert."

"Then get along. Not a word to a soul and see that I am the first you speak to when you get back. Good-bye, Roberts."

"Good night, Mr. Hubert."

Hubert Carlairs smiled as the door closed noiselessly behind his faithful servant. For the time being, the ghosts of his apprehension were laid. He took a key and unlocking a secret cupboard in his bureau took out a bottle and a glass. The abstinence practised by Mr. Hubert Carlairs in the house of his father did not hold good beyond the threshold of his own private apartments.

CHAPTER XI

DENIS CARLAIRS SMELLS RAT

THE breakfast room at Horton Towers was a pleasant apartment with a view that looked towards Godalming and the park of Witley. On the Monday morning following the departure of Denis to Paris, Hubert and Roberts were walking upon the terrace enjoying the cool air that came from the west, waiting for the gong to summon the young master in to the morning meal.

And you say that Mr. Denis returned to the Towers last night, Roberts?

Yes, sir, it was after eleven o'clock and he went straight to his room. Roberts took word to Sir Hector, he tells me, but he said he would see him in the morning and that we were not to disturb you. I did not hear of his return till this morning."

The shower in the pure Surrey air had worked wonders on Hubert Carlairs. It had blown away all his doubts and restored his confidence in himself and in Thomas Bannister. It had toned up his nervous system, so that, instead of wishing to put off till to-morrow what he might do to-day, he was eager for the time when the same cause that had caused them so much anxious

thought should be put to the final test. Also there
 Lewison. . . wily old Hebrew had been patient,
 the patient even of money-lenders had certain
 ts. Taking all for all Hubert Carlairs would
 be glad to see the end of the *affaire* Parolier.
 Dismissing Roberts, he walked towards
 windows as the gong set forth the summer
 meal.

True to . . . Sir Hector was of the old school.
 to whom . . . English breakfast is a ritual rather
 than a meal . . . it was not until the repast had
 been discussed . . . at the question of Denis and
 his visit to Paris was mooted.

"And so, Denis, from your letter I take it that
 you have weighed our Parisian friend in the balance
 and found him . . . not wanting?"

Denis, having asked permission, lit a cigarette.

"I'll tell you, as far as I can remember, the
 impression Monsieur Gressier made upon me. He is
 exactly what he claims to be, a Canadian gentleman
 of French extraction. It is a funny yarn he's
 to tell, but he's got it cut and dried to his finger
 It seems that his family played a big part in
 Great Revolution, and his cousin Jules was one
 the defenders of the Tuileries on August the tenth.
 Afterwards, they lost sight of Jules, and there
 was a story current at the time that he was sent to
 London upon a mission. So far the fellow seemed
 quite correct, as we know the story."

Sir Hector nodded.

"He mentioned the bank?"

"Yes. What's more he has the original receipt given to him by the head of the firm. He showed me that paper, a dingy, stained, much-folded scrap, but the signature was undoubtedly genuine. I've often seen old Mr. Benjamin's writing on ancient documents down at Whitehall. The paper only came into Gressier's possession last year when an uncle of his died in Ottawa, an old fellow of eighty odd. He showed me a cutting from the *Toronto Sun*. Gressier tells me that his uncle had worked in the backwoods for fifty years' and that the old chap's father had emigrated from France in seventeen-ninety-three. The old *émigré* and his son had evidently decided to cut their native country for good and all; and even the paper they had in their possession, with its promise of wealth, would not tempt them from their retreat.

"Then Jules Gressier did get back to Paris?"

"Evidently. I suppose he got into touch with his people on his return and passed on the receipt. By the way, Hubert, I suppose the bank will make it right with me when I really meet Gressier—officially that is. It was rather a low down trick to play on him, not letting him know who I was."

Sir Hector answered—

"I don't think we need worry. A man who is going to pick up a king's fortune for nothing is

hardly likely to quibble over a little matter like that. You will remember that his advertisement was vague enough."

Hubert, who had left the table and had been standing looking out over the gardens, turned.

"I hope, Denis, that you let him do most of the talking?"

"My dear Hubert, I tackled a most difficult job and saw it through to the best of my limited intelligence. I do not doubt for a minute that with your finesse and talent for business . . ."

Sir Hector sensed the coming storm.

"Pretty good evidence, don't you think, Hubert?"

. . . Good-morning, Roberts. Feeling better?"

"Thank you, Sir Hector."

Denis looked up.

"Roberts been seedy, Hubert?"

He looked from his foster-brother to the servant. Roberts had come in with a letter for his master, and he now stood with it upon the salver at Hubert's elbow. But Hubert had other things to think about except letters.

Of course it was nerves. He must still be a little unsteady from the effects of his fainting fit. And yet, for the life of him, he could not rid himself of the idea that there had been in Denis's voice some hidden suggestion. What if, after all his preparations, his foster-brother had had the bad luck to run foul of Roberts in Paris. The mere thought of

such a *contretemps* was enough to make the blood run cold. He would take an early opportunity of setting the matter at rest. In the meantime, his father was rising from the table and Denis had had no answer to his question. Roberts himself stepped into the breach.

"Mr. Hubert was good enough to allow me to go to my sister in Homerton for a few days, Mr. Denis. I was threatened with a touch of the old complaint, marsh fever, sir."

Sir Hector had reached the door. He spoke over his shoulder.

"Did Monsieur Gressier give any time when we might expect him?"

"As soon as he hears from the bank. He does not seem in any way to want to press matters. He appears to be well provided with money, we had *Cliquot* at lunch. Are you going to Whitehall this morning, father?"

"I think so, Denis. Hubert's not quite fit yet, and a day or so down here won't do him any harm. We'll go in the car, if you like."

Denis jumped up eagerly.

"I'd love it. It's a ripping morning . . . good-bye, Hubert. . . ."

Hubert, a few minutes later, stood in the porch and watched the great white car bear his father and foster-brother upon their thirty-mile run to town. And when the dust of their departure had settled

he turned and passed through the house to the gardens, calling Roberts to him as he went.

The two men walked together to a secluded part of the shrubbery.

"I have not had a great deal of time since you returned, Roberts, to see you alone. I know, by other means, that the letter reached Mr. Bannister. Now I'll have the particulars."

Roberts cleared his throat.

"I caught the train all right, sir, but there was a hold up of some sort on the other side and we did not reach Paris till eight o'clock. I went straight to the flat in the Rue Richelieu and found the concierge. He told me that Mr. Bannister had been late the night before and was not yet up. I had given him the five francs and was turning away when I heard a voice asking if that was anybody for her uncle. It was a lady, sir, a young lady who was on her way out. I remembered what you had told me and I merely raised my hat and went. I was right, sir?"

"Quite. And afterwards."

"Afterwards, I did as you told me. I took the omnibus from the Madeleine to the Odéon. I looked in at the Luxembourg and lunched at the Taverne Lorraine and idled round the cafés until dinner and the train."

"And you did not see Mr. Denis?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you, Roberts. That will do."

The man withdrew, thankful that his master's questions had ceased at the point at which they were becoming dangerous. Roberts had no moral scruples where the truth was concerned, but in the course of his chequered career the fact had been brought home to him more than once that a lie once uttered was not done with, and that it needed continual rebuilding and shoring up. A lie that was not an utter necessity was of no use to Andrew Roberts. Had he been forced by a direct question he would have stated unblushingly that he had driven to the Gare Saint Lazare in a closed fiacre after dark, and had at once drawn the curtains of his sleeper and composed himself to rest. A statement such as that would have been a necessity, for it would have served no useful purpose to tell his master that the new midnight train that leaves the Gare du Nord at midnight, and reaches London in such excellent time, had tempted him from the strict letter of his orders.

Neither would it have done any good for him to tell Mr. Hubert that the papers had published a remarkably fine programme of the Folies Bergères for that evening and that, the night being fine, he had walked along the Boulevards to the famous house of entertainment. There had been, after paying expenses, a goodly portion of the ten pounds Mr. Hubert had given him, and his master was not

in the habit of demanding, after such an errand as this, a detailed note of expenses. Surely, with the call of the Boulevards sounding in his ears, it had been folly indeed to pass in a stuffy railway carriage golden hours that might be spent so profitably in Paris. His official visit to the French capital had, so far as his master was concerned, come to a close at nine o'clock, the remaining hours were, in the opinion of Mr. Andrew Roberts, solely his own affair. A choice little dinner at a café near the Porte Saint Denis—seven courses and *vin complet* for three francs—sent Andrew off on a prolonged carouse which left him wit enough, and only enough, to get into communication with the train at the Gare du Nord upon time.

And so the mind of Andrew Roberts was at its ease as he left his master in the garden at Horton Towers. He had told no lie. Even the leading question as to whether he had seen Mr. Denis had been answered truthfully. To be perfectly frank, Mr. Andrew Roberts had seen nothing—that is, nothing to remember—since nine o'clock upon that lurid and never-to-be-forgotten evening spent in the Queen of Cities.

But if the servant's mind was easy, that of his master was far from being so. Either there had been something hidden behind Denis's inquiries after Roberts's health or Hubert Carlair's was developing nerves. In either case there was nothing

but ruin before him. The game that he and Bannister had set themselves to play was one that called for the coolest brain and the most callous of nerve-centres. Alone, he would be useless if every fancied trouble were to grip him like this . . . and it must be a week at least before he would have Thomas Bannister to rely upon.

CHAPTER XII

AN ANONYMOUS NOTE

DENIS was somewhat perturbed all that day at the bank, and it was with relief that he saw the hands of the clock pointing to four, the earliest hour at which he could with any decency shut up his desk and relieve the premises in Whitehall of his presence. He looked into Sir Hector's room as he passed out to tell his father that he was meeting friends that evening and that he might be staying in town. Another dinner and evening with his saturnine brother was not to be contemplated. A game of billiards and a whisky-and-soda at his club filled his immediate future—that is, as far as it was possible to fill a future that held such tangled possibilities.

It was while he was standing upon the traffic refuge in Trafalgar Square that Denis, feeling a light touch upon his arm, knew that Fate had again stepped into the game. He turned to see a figure that was in some way vaguely familiar, and it was not until the stranger had thrust an envelope into his hand and had darted away beneath the very bonnet of a car that had turned suddenly into

Cockspur Street, that Denis was able to place him.

Such a man had been leaning against the railings when he had come that day, nearly a week ago, from Nora's flat. There had been nothing to impress the fellow particularly upon Denis Carlairs's notice save for the fact that he had been the only person in sight as he had left Kingsbere Mansions.

And then the young man became suddenly aware that he was being regarded curiously by others standing on the traffic refuge with him. A well-dressed young man standing with a dirty envelope in his hand, staring vacantly after a man who has long since been swallowed up by the traffic, is apt to draw to himself undue attention. He raised his umbrella and a taxi drew up to the kerb. Giving the address of his club, Denis leant back and regarded critically the disreputable letter that he had drawn from its envelope and now held between the fingers of his light suède gloves.

A half-sheet of common note-paper, the kind that one may buy at a penny the packet, and it contained but a few lines of writing—writing that had evidently been carefully disguised. It was to the point, and merely stated that the writer would, upon that evening at nine o'clock, be upon the road near the Leg-o'-Mutton Pond on Hampstead Heath. The writer desired that Mr. D. C. would be at the same spot at the same hour—desired, also, that the

said Mr. D. C. would be alone. The writer went so far as to say that although there would be no danger in Mr. D. C. bringing with him half the staff of Scotland Yard, if he cared to do so, it would be useless, as the writer in that case would not declare himself, and Mr. D. C. would lose for ever the chance of meeting one whom he would find helpful in the affair that, the writer had no doubt, was at that moment filling Mr. D. C.'s mind to the exclusion of all else.

Denis let the paper slip from his fingers, and he sat staring ahead of him at the back of the driver as he bent over the wheel. Throughout all his business career he had been warned against the abomination of the anonymous letter writer. And yet in this present instance he hailed the shabby stranger of the Trafalgar Square refuge as a possible saviour. There lay ahead of him but a week in which to straighten out his position, all too short a time when he considered the forces arrayed against him. Each passing hour brought nearer that inevitable meeting in the vaults of the bank, when Gressier and Sir Hector would together examine the chest left over a century ago in the bank's care. Once the discovery had been made that all was not as it should be, there would be nothing for him but to throw himself upon the mercy of Sir Hector.

Pleasant as is the situation by the Leg-o'-Mutton

Pond when the air is warm and scented with the gorse and pines, it is not the place that one would choose for an assignation upon a night in the depth of winter. As Denis breasted the hills and came out of the valley on the ridge of the Heath, he shivered in spite of the thick frieze coat he was wearing.

There had been a little snow in London, and here, away from the smoke and traffic of the City, it had been allowed to obtain ground-hold, and all around him the Heath was powdered lightly with white. The wind that blew in fitful gusts down from the north still carried with it a few frozen particles that stung sharply the face of the waiting man. On all the expanse of the Heath and along the road that traversed the ridge there was to be seen no living thing. From the hotel upon the corner and from the houses that fringed the road, little squares of radiance cut into the night. A clock somewhere down in the Vale of Health was striking . . . the notes cut sharply through the cold air.

Denis Carlairs had been pacing the road at the eastern edge of the pond for some ten minutes before he saw the hotel door open and a figure come out upon the steps. For a few moments the man stood there silhouetted against the glow of the opened doorway, then crossed the road and approached the man waiting by the water's edge. As he drew level with Denis he paused, and the young banker recog-

nized in the dim outline of the face the man who had been watching Nora's flat, and who had, that afternoon, passed him the letter in Trafalgar Square.

"You are alone, Mr. Carlairs?"

"Quite. And, I may add, somewhat in a hurry."

"My business with you will not keep you long. Can you give me, say, half an hour?"

"Certainly, since to come here I have already given up a whole evening."

The new-comer turned.

"A sacrifice, Mr. Carlairs, which I think you will not regret. If you will walk a little way with me I can explain as we go. It is with relation to a certain necklace. You understand?"

"With a little more explanation I no doubt shall. Please go on."

For a moment there was a pause. The two men had taken the road leading eastwards and were now upon the ridge across which the wind was whistling shrilly. Below them, on either hand, the whitened expanse of the Heath lay spread out, dotted here and there by the dark clumps of bushes. To their right the dull copper of the sky denoted the great throbbing heart of London.

"A string of pearls such as the . . . the necklace we both have in mind is something of a white elephant, somewhat difficult to dispose of without the possessor being asked awkward questions. To separate the pearls would, of course, mean

a considerable reduction in the value. I speak plainly? "

" Damnably. Such openness is, to say the least, amusing."

There was a light laugh in answer.

" When one has business in a hurry, it is as well not to beat about the bush. I am here to tell you that your necklace will be returned to you. I merely spoke about the pearls to explain that the string, after all this time, is still intact. In returning it to you I am acting under pressure."

" May I ask who is applying the pressure? "

" A lady. My cousin, Miss Nora Marsden. . . You seem surprised."

" I did not know that Miss Marsden had so distinguished a family connection."

The man by Denis's side slackened a little in his walk. It would seem that the sneer had left him cold. He had taken from his pocket a roll of brown paper, and was pressing it into the banker's hand.

" I wouldn't open it here if I were you. The Heath at night is hardly the place. There is nothing more, is there? "

" In what way? "

" I mean that you are satisfied, eh? You have no desire, I hope, to see me standing in the dock—no vengeful feelings. Oh, you can look if you like. It's the real thing."

For Denis was carefully separating the paper at the end of the roll. At the other's words he proceeded, and for a moment his eyes rested upon the luminous haze that was the du Barry necklace. He thrust the packet hastily into the pocket of his coat.

"There is nothing more," he said, "if you put it that way. You are not the only one who has been at fault. In this matter we are, as it were, fellow-conspirators. Not only have I no vengeful feelings, but I must own to a certain gratitude. Heaven knows who is to blame it all, but you have done me a turn this evening that I won't forget in a hurry. One does not harbour evil against the hand that has clutched one back from the precipice."

Denis had drawn his hand from his pocket, and now he held it out. At the sight of the notes it contained the other drew back.

"There is no need . . ." he began, and then, with a laugh as he regarded the money, "there always is need, I suppose. . . . Thanks."

Turning, he was gone. Denis stood watching the narrow-shouldered figure until the night hid it. Then, his nerves somewhat shaken, he crossed the road to the Spaniards Inn and ordered a glass of brandy.

There was a cab standing before the door of the tavern as he came out, and the man on the box touched his cap with the shaft of his whip.

"Cab, sir?"

Denis thanked the fate that had made another walk across the wind-swept Heath unnecessary. He opened the door of the dark, musty vehicle, and entered, giving as his direction the Gate House. There he would perhaps have the further luck to fall in with a taxi that would whisk him back to the light and warmth of his club.

He leant back against the mouldy cushions, at peace with the world at last. In the morning the necklace would again be resting in its case in the Gressier chest, its little outing would be a thing of the past, as would be an unsavoury episode in the life of Denis Carlairs. And yet . . .

Behind the peace of his mind was the thought of Nora. There had been a time when he had dreamed dreams—dreams of a home in which Nora held pride of place. . . . Perhaps, in the tenseness of his thoughts, he breathed her name aloud. . . . In a moment he was sitting bolt upright in the darkness of the cab, listening . . . listening for a repetition of the sound he thought he had heard. Again it came, a softly breathed name in a voice he knew and loved.

"Denis . . ."

The girl was dressed in a dark blue cloak trimmed with black fox, and so it was not until the man struck a match that she became visible. The yellow flame flared up and illuminated the dim interior of

the cab, revealing the shrinking figure and the pale face from which Nora Marsden was lifting a thick veil. She laughed nervously.

"Forgive me, Denis."

"Then this is not an accidental meeting?"

"No. I have been waiting here in the cab, knowing it to be the only one available. Ronald had his instructions, and the driver, too." Then, after a pause: "Why don't you speak to me?"

"I was wondering what new move you—and your precious Ronald had in store for me."

"But you have the necklace. Surely that alone speaks for our honesty in this matter?"

There was silence for a moment.

"Yes, Nora, I have the necklace. Perhaps I am not quite fair to you. It looks as though you wanted to make what reparation you could."

"Yes, Denis. Reparation for the fault of another. Shall I tell you about it?"

"It might be as well."

As the girl told her story she leant forward, and her face shone pale and indistinct in the darkness. She spoke in a low voice, as though she feared her words might be heard above the rattle of the crazy wheels. She told the story of the night of the ball, and of how in the masked man who had attacked her she had recognized, from the first, her cousin, the only son of the aunt with whom she lived and who had made so many sacrifices for her. That

was the secret she had carried with her since the New Year.

"And so, Denis, you see how I was placed. Ever since that night I have implored Ronald to return the necklace. To expose him would bring grief upon his mother, might even kill her. She knew nothing of his criminal ways. There were times when I despaired—at those times I felt that I was unclean, that I had no right to see you."

Denis leant eagerly forward and felt in the darkness for the girl's hands.

"Then your coolness towards me was assumed, was acted. You did not mean it?"

"I did not mean to be cruel—God knows how it hurt me to hurt you."

"Then you—you love me?"

Silence—save for the rattle and creak of the springs of the cab. Denis drew the girl towards him and pressed his lips to hers.

"And so, dearest, our dark hours are over. Tomorrow the necklace will be back in its old place, and when the claimant comes he will find all in order. Tell me, Nora, how did you induce Ronald to part with his possession? And where is Ronald now? What is he going to do?"

"It came to threats at last before he would give in. There was no other way. I looked upon the shock to my aunt as a risk that must be taken.

It was that against my life's happiness. Besides, there was always the possibility that I could keep the details from her knowledge."

The cab rumbled out from the Spaniards Lane and drew up beside the Gate House. Denis, leaning from the window, told the man to drive on down the hill. Lights from passing vehicles flashed intermittently in at the window, lighting up the happy face of the girl as she leant back in the arms of Denis Carlairs. The two young people spoke but little; they were living over in their minds the happiness that, after the dark days, spread out before them.

It was nearly eleven when Denis left Nora at the door of her flat and turned his steps westwards. The snow had ceased, and the frost had made of the pavements fairy walks that glistened whitely in the rays of the big arc lamps of Holborn. At first Denis had thought of spending the night at his club, but now he hesitated.

He wondered whether it were wise to remain all night in London when he was in possession of so valuable a bauble as that which now nestled so comfortingly against his side. From time to time the man allowed his fingers to trace the hard outline through his coat, until he asked himself if that also were wise. Might it not draw attention towards him? "

He glanced at his watch. Just time enough to

reach Waterloo and the last train to Guildford. Once at the Towers he would feel safe.

He hailed a taxi, and in a moment was speeding over the crisp snow of the deserted streets.

For the first time in many a long day the room in the Towers that was Denis Carlairs's own apartment seemed to that young man like home. There was something past all belief in the fate that a few hours should be able to expunge from his overwrought mind all its worries. During the run down to Surrey he had smoked two cigars in a contentment such as he had not known that year. What a sure sign that the misfortune that had been dogging his steps since his fatal blunder had at last relented. A matter of a few hours and his shadows had all fled and sunshine come again into his life. It would now all be such plain sailing, he would seek some excuse in the morning to go alone to the vault and once there it would be a simple matter to slip the necklace back into its case. . . .

Late as was the hour when he reached Guildford, Denis was in no mood for bed. Far pleasanter to sit in the wide chintz-covered armchair and build and rebuild castles in the flames of the fire that burnt so brightly in the grate. Gone were all disturbing thoughts of Nora, gone all the numberless fears of the past few weeks. From the heart of the coals the face of the girl seemed to smile up at him, the eyes

purged of the selfishness and anger that she had considered it her duty to assume, so that her aunt and benefactress should be spared pain.

There was the thought, always there, however, that the path of his love was no rose-strewn one. Sir Hector would oppose with all his power his adopted son's union with an actress. But the fate that had served him so well that night would not forsake him. In spite of the old saying, he told himself that his love would run smoothly did he but act fearlessly.

Denis glanced at the door of his room and at the closely curtained windows. Here, free from all prying eyes, he was safe, free to look at the jewels that bulged the inside pocket of his coat. He drew his chair up to the small table and arranged the shade of the lamp so that the rays were thrown down upon the rolled brown paper. He slipped the rubber band from the packet.

How joyously the gems caught the light; how wantonly they glowed with the rays. Denis smiled at them, *to* them almost, as though they were sentient things . . . friends.

He thought of the last time he had seen them, glistening upon the white throat of the girl he loved. He thought of that moment in the vault of the bank; the eerie silence seemed again to encompass him . . . thought, too, of that tragic moment when Nora lay moaning in his arms in the

florist's shop, in the Covent Garden arcade. How many tragic moments had passed since then! And now . . .

What a wonderful power lies sleeping in the heart of a gem, what stories lie hidden in its slumbering fires. Into the ears of those who care to listen they will whisper of long dead romances, of passionate men and women long since dust. The pearls were whispering to Denis now. . . .

And he could see the glories of the past as he listened—the *fêtes-galante* of the Fifteenth Louis. There were courtiers and silken gowns, whispered vows and the sheen of a thousand candles, the scented groves of Versailles. The gems had been there—they were telling him so—they were about the shapely throat of Jeanne of the Gutter, matching the sparkling eyes that had captivated a king of France, eyes whose approval or disapproval could make or unmake ministers and cardinals.

Denis saw the château at Marley where, years later, the same woman crouched in the window embrasure listening to the sound of the guns that were battering down the last defences of Royalty. The gems were there, too, but not about the throat of the du Barry. In their velvet case they were pressed to the bosom of the terrified woman who, in her panic, held on to the things of the life that had been hers. For the jewels she had no thought, then, but where she could place them in safety to

hide them from the mob that at any moment might come pouring out from the gates of Paris to seek her. . . .

"Good evening, Denis."

The young man started up and stared at the speaker. Hubert had entered noiselessly, and now stood, a sinister figure, hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his camel-hair dressing-gown, looking at his brother.

"I . . . I didn't hear you, Hubert."

His foster-brother smiled.

"No, Denis, I didn't knock. I saw a light in here and came to investigate. I have not been sleeping well since that absurd fainting fit of mine. I thought it might be burglars as I didn't hear you come in. When did you come down?"

Denis did not at once answer. There was something in his brother's eyes that set him thinking of a cat and a mouse. He wondered if Hubert had seen the necklace. If he had done so he showed no sign, and yet . . . he must have seen it lying there, all its radiant glory beneath the rays of the shaded lamp. It was possible that the packet had escaped him, but there was a conviction at Denis's heart that Hubert was playing with him.

"On the last train, Hubert. You are up late."

"I told you I have been sleeping badly."

He crossed the room and laid his hand upon the

decanter that stood by the lamp. He smiled curiously at the younger man.

"An invalid's privilege, Denis. Besides, a whisky-and-soda is a help to conversation."

He poured himself out a drink, and took a cigarette from the silver box that stood upon the table, tapping it thoughtfully upon the palm of his hand.

"Shocked, eh, Denis? Oh, I'm not such a white hen's chick as all that. It's necessary to play a game sometimes . . . even with such a good old chap as the Guv'nor. You won't split . . . and anything you may have to say after to-night won't carry much weight."

"I don't understand you, Hubert."

The elder man laughed shortly.

"And yet it's simple—perfectly simple. Perhaps you will understand better what I mean when I tell you that I have been standing over there by the door for the last . . . shall we say three minutes?"

Hubert paused, and pointed with his cigarette to the brown-paper parcel.

"Who's the lady, Denis; and why turn thief to gratify the fair one's whims?"

"Hubert. . . ."

"Now don't get up in the bows. What am I to think, anyway? Here I come into your room, and find you gloating—you were gloating, Denis—over a recluse that must be worth what the novelists

are so fond of alluding to as a king's ransom. Not a bad simile in this case, eh? "

He waited for a moment as though for an answer, and then went on.

" Louis the Fifteenth bled his people white for that little row of stones. I don't take any credit to myself for recognizing it, there's not another like it in the world. I have often told the Guv'nor that it was a waste to let it lie hidden, but, as you know, he's a stickler where the honour of the bank is concerned. I suppose you've had this in your mind for some time, and now that this claimant has come along you thought it time to get busy, and secure the goods. Why did you take it? . . . No, you don't! "

For Denis had made a motion as though he would catch up the paper. Hubert leapt forward, and with a sharp movement of the arm sent the younger man reeling against the wall. Looking, he saw that Hubert had taken a revolver from the pocket of his dressing gown, and while covering him he was gathering up the gems.

" It wasn't likely, was it Denis, that I should come here unarmed? I saw a light, and as I told you I did not know whether there were burglars in the house or no. I only found one . . . one that is going to leave the Towers within the hour."

" What do you mean? "

Hubert laughed.

" I mean, my dear Denis, that this night's work is the luckiest I have ever struck, or hope to strike in my life—if I live to be a hundred. It means that, for ever, I have rid myself of you. Do you think that I have liked you being here, sharing with me the affection of the Guv'nor, you, a brat who, for all I know, was dragged up in the gutter? Do you think it was a pleasant thought that in time you would share with me the fortune that he leaves . . . that you should rob me, his son, of my inheritance? . . . Come in, Roberts? "

The door of the room opened wider, and the manservant edged his way into the room.

" You have seen and heard, Roberts? "

" Everything, Mr. Hubert."

" That will do. Now, Denis "—Hubert glanced at the clock—" I give you an hour—not a minute more. I'll come back here in that time, and I shall expect to find you gone."

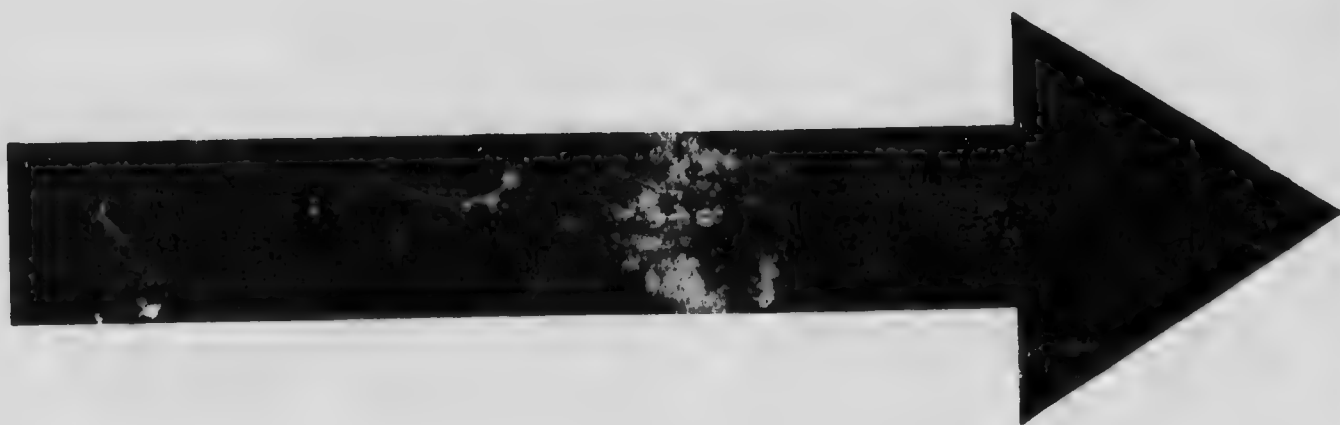
" And where do you suggest that I should go? "

" To the devil, for all I care. Besides, there will be a train to town in a couple of hours—I don't care where you spend the remainder of your days, so long as it isn't anywhere where I am. I'll send you some money next week, to the Post Office at Havre, and—well, I think you will find plenty of boats at Havre sailing for the Colonies." Hubert Carlairs turned and walked to the door. His fingers upon the handle, he spoke over his shoulder.

"While you keep away I will remain mum. This necklace will to-morrow be returned to its place, and the Guv'nor will never know what has happened. We must spare the old man all we can. If you show your nose again it will be another matter. Roberts and myself can convince him as to the worth of our story even if you have the impudence to deny it. Good-night, Denis."

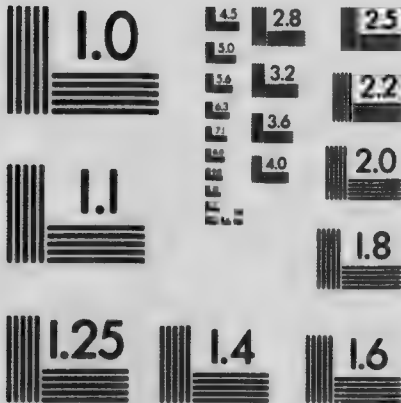
Denis did not answer. After all, what answer was there for him to make? As the American crooks express it he "had been caught with the goods" and against that there was no appeal. He remained standing against the wall where he had been hurled by his foster-brother, watching while his enemy packed up securely in the brown paper the gems that had had such a sinister influence upon his life. Hubert handed the parcel to Roberts, and Denis saw the servant button it away in an inner pocket. Master and man left the room together . . . the door was closed softly. . . .

Denis crossed to the little table. It was difficult to think that but a few moments ago he had been sitting there, his eyes feasting upon the gems that now reposed in the pocket of Andrew Roberts, difficult to think that in a few short minutes the edifice of his happiness had been dashed to the ground. And yet, he had to admit to himself, that same edifice had been built but a few hours, that he was but slightly worse off than he was at nine



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o'clock that evening. His discovery had come a little sooner, that was all.

He wondered whether, even at this eleventh hour, he should not go to the man who had been to him more than a father and throw himself upon his mercy. Perhaps his story would be believed, although with Hubert and Roberts against him he would be hard put to it to prove his case. In any event it would mean bringing in the name of Nora Marsden, and that was not to be thought of. The girl had made sacrifices enough already, and it was not for him to be behind her in self-denial. It had become his turn for sacrifice.

He would write to the girl, just a plain manly letter telling her how things were. He would adopt the tone that Fate was too strong for them, and that, for the present, they must be dead to one another. He was going out into the world, penniless and with barely a prospect of making a living. He would not allow himself another interview, it would be far too painful; he would just drift out of it all, taking upon his shoulders all the blame for everything. And then he thought of the morrow.

In an hour he must be away from Horton Towers. He had a fair amount of ready money, and he would walk to Guildford, and get a bed at the "Angel." There would be no need to touch London, as he could get to Southampton direct. It did not occur to him to do other than take Hubert's advice, and,

after all, Havre was as good a place to hide oneself in as any other, and although it went against the grain to accept money from his foster-brother, he had but little choice if he was to reach the Colonies.

The next half-hour Denis spent in writing, then, packing a small bag, he left the room, and passed down the corridors of the silent house. There was a door leading out into the gardens used almost exclusively by the servants and this door Denis chose for his exit from the life he had known—into that other that stretched, an untrodden desert, in front of him.

And so, for many months, Denis Carlairs passes out of our story, although Fate continued to take a most intimate interest in his affairs. When the French police were requested, a few days later, to come to the assistance of their brethren of Scotland Yard, they confessed themselves powerless. True, a gentleman answering to the description of Mr. Denis Carlairs arrived at Havre from Southampton upon the evening of the last day of February, and stayed the night at the "Bras d'Or" upon the quay. He registered under the name of Henry Gibson, and occupied his room, a small apartment overlooking the Rue Maritime, for two days. Upon the third evening he went out about seven o'clock and was seen no more. His bag and its contents provided no clue, were held in the custody of the Pré-

lecture, and were at the disposal of Scotland Yard. There had been no trouble in Havre upon the night of Mr. Carlairs's—or Gibson's—disappearance, neither had there been any body recovered from the harbour.

Scotland Yard took the matter up on the spot and despatched two of their smartest officers to the French port. But it was of no avail. Denis Carlairs—or Henry Gibson—would appear to have walked from the door of the ' Bras d'Or ' into eternity.

And if you had mentioned to these two officers such a bauble as the du Barry necklace they would have gazed at you in blank astonishment. There was no question of robbery, they would have told you, and their interest in the missing man was purely connected with the death of his foster-father. And—this being your turn to stare in blank astonishment—they would have proceeded to tell you their story, or perhaps, diving into the recesses of their voluminous pocket books they would have shown you this cutting from the *Daily Courier* of February 27.—

“ A tragic occurrence is reported from Guildford. Sir Hector Carlairs, the well known banker, was this morning discovered dead in the shrubbery adjoining his house on the road between Guildford and Godalming. The police are making inquiries, and a story of exceptional interest is promised at the inquest which will take place in two days' time. The authori-

ties are at the moment busy with their investigations, foremost among which is the whereabouts of Mr. Denis Carlairs, the adopted son of the deceased, who disappeared from the house the night previous to the discovery of Sir Hector's body." . . .

THE END OF BOOK I

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

"ALIAS THOMAS BANNISTER"

THE blue-grey smoke from the choice cigarette held in the well-manicured fingers of Monsieur Armand Gressier—late Mr. Thomas Bannister, of the Rue Richelieu—spiralled slowly up into the still air of the perfect summer evening. And Monsieur Armand Gressier watched it in lazy contentment; indeed, he had been something less than a man had he been otherwise than content—that is, of course, if one eliminates all thought of conscience, a matter that Monsieur Armand Gressier had long ago shaken off as being too much of a menace to the success of his manifold plans.

Regard, for a moment, the picture. A wide stone-flagged terrace with, here and there, wicker chairs and tables set among shady palms and flowering shrubs in green tubs. Beyond, over the wide balustrade, a level lawn upon which statues gleamed whitely. Again, beyond the vivid stretch of green, the dense foliage of shrubberies and tall, feathery-topped pines against the amethyst of an evening sky. In the air, the soft air that scarcely swayed

those feathery crests, the fragrance of roses and all the sweet scents of an August garden. Further afield, upon the other side of the lichen-stained wall that hemmed in the estate of Merlains, orchards of glowing fruit, glimpses of the silver Eure and wide pastures and uplands rising in the far distance to low-lying hills of hazy blue.

Three months of residence had worked a miracle with Merlains, and the desolation upon which Mr. Thomas Bannister had looked that winter morning when he had first visited the château had been transformed as by the touch of a magician's wand, and had become a paradise. Small wonder that Bannister looked with satisfaction upon the outcome of his great *coup*, that last wild gamble that had set Myra and himself safe and high upon such a pleasant place in this old world of ours. It had all been so simple—so simple, indeed, that there were moments when the new owner of Merlains asked himself whether it had not been too easy, whether there were not perils lurking near. Fate was not usually so kind to him. Everything had passed off with almost irritating smoothness. The case of the Gressier claimant had been given unbounded publicity, and the romantic aspect of the claim had in a measure clouded the issues and stilled criticism. The sudden death of Sir Hector Carlairs had made the visit to the vault merely a personal affair between Sir Hubert and himself, a formal proceeding that must have held a wealth of humour for both of

them. And so it had been all along the line, knotty points, previously arranged, were raised only to be triumphantly overcome. True, certain legal opinions were loath to grant possession to Gressier upon his evidence, but certainly no one else had a better claim and it was against all common sense, they agreed, to leave untold wealth lying in a vault when there existed the slightest excuse for its liberation.

Upon the other side of the channel things had been practically the same. The claim of Monsieur Armand Gressier had taken the immediate neighbourhood of Merlains by surprise, and there had been no hint of opposition. Surely it were better that so important an estate as Merlains should be in the hands of this estimable gentleman than that its wide gardens and rooms should be given over to weeds and rats and inactivity. A new era would spring up in Massey, an era whose prosperity would reach even to the tradespeople in Louviers. And, talking of Louviers, brings us to David Fourdelles.

In the notary of the Rue du Dome in the adjacent town, Mr. Thomas Bannister had found his only opposition and that but a slight one. From decrepit enamelled boxes Fourdelles drew to light ancient deeds and assignments, wills and conveyances which, the man of law claimed, merited attention. A civil action was entered to be heard at Rouen, lodged by the notary on behalf of a blacksmith at Arras, of the name of Gress, but the action was withdrawn. What precisely prompted this withdrawal it would have

been difficult to say, but the occurrence can perhaps be traced to a visit to the Rue du Dome of Sir Hubert Carlairs, the new head of the great London banking house. A week later the blacksmith and his numerous family sailed from Havre for the land of the free—and Notary David Fourdelles presented his account to Monsieur Armand Gressier. The bill was settled without demur or delay, and David Fourdelles thereafter, having definitely decided upon which side of his bread lay the butter, became a constant visitor to the office and a confidential adviser to its new master in all matters pertaining to the property.

And to do Thomas Bannister credit, Armand Gressier had proved a success in the district. The little dinners given in the panelled apartment that faced the terrace drew the people for miles around, as a magnet attracts steel filings. Aristocratic old ladies whose exclusiveness had robbed them of most of life's joys sat up and, as it were, took notice. Debretts and Almanachs de Gotha were brought into play and the romantic and creditable rôles played by the Gressiers in far-off days were exploited to their full and bore excellent fruit. Retired army men and rich manufacturers appeared from all quarters, scenting, perhaps, the bouquet of the wine with which the newcomer to Merlains had filled his cellars, or the aroma of his cigars. An era of prosperity settled upon the countryside, and the names of Gressier and Merlains became synonymous with all

that was elegant and desirable in this world. The fame of the Gressier entertainments reached to Rouen, to Paris itself, so that Bannister had the delight of seeing his niece in social surroundings of which, for the first time in his chequered career, he had no call to feel ashamed.

And these guests had their uses. Over the polished oak of Gressier's table there passed from time to time whispers, little breathings, that were not allowed to pass unheeded by the host. A word dropped by Baron Horniau one evening as to the prospects of the amazing Bera Bonds had borne excellent financial fruit. Fourdelles, who to his profession of notary added a wide knowledge of the affairs of the Bourse, patted himself upon the back and blessed the lack of education possessed by a certain blacksmith in New York, who was probably drinking himself to death on the twenty dollars a week allowed to him by a grateful but very distant "kinsman"

"Ah, Beckstaff—that you?"

A tall, clean-limbed young man had appeared at the open window of the dining-room, and was standing there as though he wished to speak to Monsieur Gressier. Robert Beckstaff had for the last month acted as secretary to the Master of Merlains, whose activities on the stock market had called for expert assistance in the matter of correspondence.

"Want me, Beckstaff? Nothing in the way of business, I hope, on such a glorious night?"

Robert Beckstaff smiled.

" No, monsieur, it can hardly be called business. It's to deal with the fête next week. Mademoiselle has been going over details with me."

Gressier laughed.

" And you've come across a knotty problem, eh? Money, I bet a thousand. Sit down, Beckstaff, and take a liqueur, and let's know the worst."

The secretary did as he was invited.

" It's about the talent. Henrisen, the agent in Paris, has sent a list. Here it is "

The owner of Merlains took the slip of paper handed to him and ran his eyes over the items.

" And whom does mademoiselle favour? "

" Nora Marsden, sir. That's the girl who made so sensational a success in London in the spring. She is at the Marigny this week, and is 'resting' next, but is not leaving Paris. Mademoiselle Mannering thinks that as your guests will mostly be French, an English actress would be an attraction. Henrisen puts her price at four hundred francs."

" A little high for a girl who has just come to the front, eh? "

" Making hay while the sun is shining," Beckstaff answered with a laugh. " Some of these favourites have only a short life with the public. You agree? "

Gressier made a mark against the actress's name with his little gold pencil.

" Certainly. Anything Myra wishes I agree to.

Just drop a line to Henrisen and book her, there's a good chap."

Beckstaff finished his liqueur and re-entered the château, leaving the new owner to the reflections brought into being by this little interlude.

A pretty penny the fête of next week would cost Armand Gressier—but he smiled to himself as he said it would be worth it. Thomas Bannister had never been the one to count the cost where success was in the balance, social or financial, so why should Armand Gressier hold his hand? There would be men and women from Paris at Merlains next week, a word from whom, appreciated at its true worth, would pay for the whole affair. Old Edouard Noiret would be there, the sportsman in whose stables at Chantilly was a colt that was to be sent over next year to Epsom and about whose prowess certain kings of the turf were beginning already to whisper. With careful tact and a discerning choice of vintages, what might not be learnt from Edouard Noiret, whose taste for good champagne was equal to his knowledge of horseflesh? And the Baroness D'Allistaire, whose little finger would open all social doors to Myra and her uncle when they visited Paris in the winter: surely the Baroness was worth all attention! Who knew but that in Paris, the master of Merlains might want a friend, when he should summon up courage enough to enter, in his new rôle, the city in which he had played a vastly different part in his old? . . . Then there would be Hubert. . . .

For an instant a slight frown passed over the brow of Mr. Thomas Bannister. For the first time in his life he had taken into one of his games a partner upon equal terms, and the thought took from him some of the sweets of his success. He was sorry that he had asked Hubert—or rather that he had acceded to the banker's wish to come to Merlains. It placed him somewhat in a false position. Hubert, with his claim upon half the profits of their scheme, would be impressed by the lavish display, and would want to know where the money to make it came from. Also, the man remembered that Hubert had looked at Myra in a way that her uncle did not like. A man so steeped in guilt and deceit was no companion for a girl like Myra Mannering. Little words Hubert had let drop from time to time came back to him and showed him clearly the way the wind blew.

It was for Myra's sake that he had schemed and taken such risks. For her sake he had plundered and robbed where he could, counting no cost too great if only the girl of whom he was so fond could win to happiness and to a place in a world of honest men and women. And now that he had brought his ship, as he had fondly hoped, to the safe harbourage of Merlains, he was beginning to have qualms as to the future, to feel vaguely the menace of his first mate, Sir Hubert Carlairs.

The pleasurable anticipations of the coming week were already overcast, the presence of the banker at the festivities would rob the fête of half its joy.

so far as the host was concerned. With Hubert would come his familiar—the sinister-faced Roberts, without whom, it would seem, Hubert Carlairs never travelled far. Roberts's thin features and evil eyes would flank Hubert's sallow visage—skeletons at the feast.

Thomas Bannister took up his glass and finished his liqueur. He shivered a little. Perhaps it was unwise to sit out there on the terrace after sundown. Night was already draping the gardens with her fairy veil, and the glory had died out of the western sky leaving it grey and sombre. The statues on the grass showed ghost-like in the scented dusk, and somewhere from the darkness of the shrubbery an owl hooted dismally.

Turning his head, the man saw that the lights in the drawing-room had been switched on, for a pale shimmer of silken-shaded radiance painted in ochre the grey stones at the further end of the terrace. Bannister heard the murmur of voices and a shadow passed between the light and the window. Followed the opening bars of a love song of Gounod's, and then the voice of his niece, clear and pure, floated out over the silence of the gardens.

The man rose from his chair and tossed the end of his cigarette down on to the lawn. Then he walked slowly towards the end of the terrace. For a moment he stood in the shadows watching the interior of the soft-tinted drawing-room. Myra, her clinging gown of amber silk shimmering in the

light of the lamp, was at the piano, and bending over her, one hand upon the corner of the music, the handsome profile and broad shoulders of Robert Beckstaff showed 'silhouetted against the glow.

And there was something in the picture, in the devotion of that bowed head, that pleased Thomas Bannister. Beckstaff was not rich, otherwise he would have had no need to seek secretarial work but he was clean and wholesome and well born—a native dweller in that world into which it was Bannister's wish that Myra should enter and take her place. He turned from the window, his thin lips wreathing into a smile.

Hubert Carlairs would not have her uncle alone to fight if he dared to raise his eyes to Myra Manning. The good right arm of Robert Beckstaff might prove a barrier before which even the wealth of a Carlairs might not prevail.

CHAPTER II

THE FÊTE AT THE CHÂTEAU MERLAINS

It is the duty of a narrator to tell of people, places and things only so far as those particular subjects have direct connection with the story. There are by-ways a-plenty where the writer is tempted, as it were, from the direct road to wander among the delights of wordy dalliance. How tempting, for instance, to pause over the details of the fête with which the new owner of Merlains regaled the neighbourhood on that August afternoon; one could write pages of description, could dwell lovingly upon the ices sent out from Rumpelmayer's, the flowers from Marcelle's, the gowns. . . .

But all that is but a side issue of the work before a narrator. Rather he must single out certain times, certain spots, certain people that are necessary to the unfolding of his plot and concentrate upon them . . . and so we come to an alley-way banked high by rhododendrons in a remote part of the gardens of the Château Merlains, where two women are walking, Myra Mannering and another—a slim, girlish woman, who leans heavily upon the arm of her companion. From beyond the banks of bushes

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came the soft strains of a string orchestra, muted, melodious. Through a gap in the foliage one could see a gleam of colour, vivid lawns, gay marquees—the backcloth against which the tragedy of the Château Merlains was so soon to be played.

“Are you feeling better, Miss Marsden?”

Nora Marsden looked up into the kindly dark eyes. The last few months had made a difference to the actress; the lighthearted girl from whom Denis had parted a year and a half ago had become a woman with all a woman's beauty, all a woman's sorrow in her eyes.

“I am much better, Miss Mannering; but do not let us go back yet to all the heat and the noise. A seasoned creature like myself should know better than to faint: It was the sun, perhaps, and yet——”

“And yet, what, dear?”

Nora passed a hand across her eyes.

“Oh, I'm silly; I caught sight among my audience, over there on the lawn, of a face I had not seen for a long while . . . it brought back to me a great sorrow. We are emotional people, we actresses.”

“One of my uncle's guests?”

“Yes . . . I have never met him, but I saw him once or twice . . . a long time ago. I had a friend . . . how long have you known Hubert Carlairs, Miss Mannering? Oh, forgive me, it is not for a paid entertainer to question her employer.”

Myra smiled.

"Sir Hubert Carlairs is an old friend of my uncle's. They were acquainted before the death of Sir Hector—before Hubert came into the title. I am sorry if sad remembrances——"

Nora Marsden looked up smilingly.

"It is nothing, Miss Mannering. As I tell you, I have never met Sir Hubert, and so far as I know he has never seen me before this afternoon. What is that?"

Myra laughed reassuringly.

"Not fire, dear, only the dressing-bell. Meet me at seven on the terrace—dinner is at half-past."

They had come from the shrubbery on to the level lawn, all but deserted now that the party had entered the house. Servants were busy at the tables, and in and out of the gaudy, striped marquees. Myra left Nora at the foot of the terrace steps, and stood there watching the slight figure until it had disappeared within the house.

There was something a little disquieting in the conversation she had just had with the actress. She had never liked Hubert, and there had been times when she had almost distrusted the friendship between the banker and her uncle. Now that she allowed rein to her thoughts, many little things came to her out of the past. Hubert had more than once visited her uncle and, always, his appearance would seem to be connected with an upheaval

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in their lives. She remembered a letter coming from him one night to the Rue Richelieu and of the preoccupied state of her uncle at reading it. It was but seldom that Hubert and Myra had met, but upon the few occasions they had been thrown together the girl had felt the greatest aversion. . . .

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle."

Myra looked up. A servant was waiting to pass by her, a tray laden with wine bottles and soiled glasses held before him. The girl moved aside to make way for him, and as she did so her eyes met his. The man passed into the house and Myra, after a moment's pause, called to her one of the servants of the château.

"That is a new man, Jules?"

"Mais non, mademoiselle. It is the private man of Sir Hubert Carlairs. He is helping us this afternoon."

"Thank you, that will do."

The servant bowed and returned to his work. Myra stood at the foot of the steps, one hand resting lightly upon the stone terminal at the lawn's edge. Her eyes were looking into the past, to a morning in the Rue Richelieu when a man had come before her uncle was out of bed. She had been on her way downstairs, she remembered, and had found the man in conversation with the concierge of the flats. He had brought a letter and although she had not at the time given the matter much thought she

remembered now that it was a letter that had sent her uncle into one of his rare fits of temper. And the man who had brought the letter was the man who had that moment passed her with the tray—the personal servant of Sir Hubert Carlairs.

Strange that the recollection should worry her. Miss Marsden's words had got upon her nerves, she told herself, and she was seeing shadows where no shadows were. And yet that letter had been often in her thoughts. It had caused her uncle so much worry. Then Myra Mannering laughed away the cobwebs and ran up to her room to dress.

The clock in the tiny turret over the stables and garages pointed at the quarter to seven.

Robert Beckstaff had been waiting in the little grove to the west of the rose garden since half-past six—waiting for one of those sweet, stolen interviews that made life bearable to him.

Ever since the day when his application to Gressier had given him the post of secretary to that gentleman he had been wholly in love. He called to mind the first interview when in answer to an advertisement in the *Matin* he had presented himself at Merlains. At that time he was a young man at a loose end with wealthy parents, but with a passion to be doing something in the world. The post of financial secretary to a man in the position of Armand Gressier was work after his own heart,

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carrying with it, as it did, an insight into the business worlds both of Paris and London.

As he had waited in the library at Merlains he had cared little whether the position he was seeking came to him or not. Certainly, it would be pleasant to put in a few months here in this beautiful corner of France with congenial work and Paris but a stone's throw away in case he should feel bored. . . . And then into his thoughts had walked a girl.

The library windows had been open. It was, he remembered, a warm morning of early spring with the gardens glowing in their budding foliage and with little white balls of cloud high up in a blue sky. And outside the window was the terrace and from where Robert Beckstaff had been sitting he could see the top of the shallow steps leading down to the lawn. Myra had stood there upon the topmost step, the sunlight flushing her face and the light wind stirring the tendrils of her hair. . . . Robert Beckstaff watched the terrace long after she had passed down into the garden, watched it with very decided views as to whether the appointment he had come to obtain was important to him or not. Within the week, a car had driven in from Paris piled high with kit bags and trunks and Mr. Robert Beckstaff had become an inmate of the Château Merlains, a young man most ardently in love.

With the girl it was little better. For the first

time in her life she was deceiving the uncle who had been so good to her; deceiving him, but with no malice in her heart. It is love, no less than conscience, that makes cowards of us all, and Myra feared her uncle's ambition for her. And so, since Robert had come to Merlains, the sweet secret had been kept.

The grove in which the young man waited might have been designed by Cupid himself. A sweet-scented place of briar and fir, with winding walks and box-bordered paths. It was from this grove that visitors to the château, pausing spellbound at open windows, listened of nights to the nightingales. A place of fragrance and of sweet sounds, a place for love and lovers. Myra had thrown a light shantung cloak over her dinner dress, and Robert, turning at her light step, thought that never had he seen so fair a sight. The perfect oval of the face, more perfect by the close dressing of the dark hair, the level brows and eyes of brown, the parted lips as the girl came towards him. For a moment they were in each other's arms. Then Myra raised her head, and as she did so the cloak slipped back from her throat, showing a gleam of pearls.

"Why, Myra——"

"Yes. Beautiful are they not, Robert. It is the first time that uncle would let me wear them. You have heard him speak of these?"

Her hand touched the gems at her throat.

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"But, is it wise, Myra? There are so many people here, extra servants and the like. I thought the du Barry necklace was safe at the bankers."

Myra laughed.

"That's what took uncle to Paris last week. He said that the fête was a fitting time for the pearls to see the light of day. It is a pity, isn't it, that they should be locked away in a musty old vault in Paris?"

"Especially after a hundred and twenty years in another musty old vault in London, eh, Myra? But you look stunning and, after all, I suppose there is very little real danger. Let's talk of ourselves."

The girl nestled close to him.

"Don't we know all there is to be known, dear, about ourselves? Didn't we know all that the moment we met? Besides, there is no time for love-making."

"But dinner is not till half-past. It is not seven yet."

"I know. But I gave a promise to Miss Marsden that I would meet her on the terrace. She knows nobody here, and it must be lonely. Did I not tell you, Robert, that the poor girl fainted after her recitation this afternoon? We won't be selfish, Robert. Other people want a little happiness."

Robert laughed.

"If there's any left in this old world of ours

after we've done with it. After all, we can afford to wait, can't we? "

The sinking sun threw long shadows across their path and painted the boles of the pines with splendour. In the branches overhead the birds were twittering peevishly and settling themselves for the night. The air in the little wood was fragrant with moss and it was with regret that the two young people emerged from their pleasaunce on to the broad lawns. Already upon the broad terrace the guests were gathering, little knots of idle people, smoking cigarettes or partaking of the *apéritifs* that the servants were handing round on silver trays. The niece of the host was soon surrounded, and Robert was forced to watch from a distance the homage paid to the girl he loved. Myra had handed her cloak to one of the maids, and now stood, a vision of shimmering white, against the old grey stonework of the château.

Robert had been asked when he parted from Myra to seek out Miss Marsden and bring her to the terrace, and now he set out on his quest. He came upon the actress at the foot of the great oaken staircase, and, offering his arm, escorted her out among the guests.

"Miss Mannering asked me to find you," he said. "She is there, talking to Baron Caradus."

"How good she is to me. I felt I had found a friend when I was taken ill this afternoon."

"You have quite recovered, Miss Marsden? It was a trying recitation for you on so hot an afternoon."

"Quite recovered, thank you, Mr. Beckstaff. There, Miss Mannering is alone for a moment. Will you take me to her?"

They threaded their way through the crowd of people upon the terrace and came to Myra. She turned impulsively towards the actress and caught her by both hands.

"You look yourself again, Miss Marsden. This is splendid. I have asked uncle not to call upon you again this evening. Signor Tostini has arrived, and I insisted upon your taking a rest. I have had you put near me at dinner."

The girl raised her eyes to Myra's.

"You are too good. I do hope I did not worry you by my fancies this afternoon. I think that . . . oh, my God!"

"What is it? Rob . . . Mr. Beckstaff! Miss Marsden has fainted again."

The young secretary rushed forward in time to catch the limp figure as it fell backwards. People surged forward.

"Stand back, please . . . give her air . . . she's coming round."

Slowly Nora Marsden opened her eyes. For a few moments all around her was confusion. The man in whose arms she was lying was, to her, Denis

Carlairs, and around her were the porters and salesmen of Covent Garden Market. The girl closed her eyes and the vision passed, and when next she opened them it was to a full understanding of what had happened. She gazed round half fearfully at the mass of faces clustered about her and she singled out Myra. But it was not upon the dark eyes full of sympathy that gazed down upon her that hers rested, but upon the superb necklace that her host's daughter was wearing. . . . She struggled upright, her mouth working. . . .

"First . . . necklace . . . knife. . . ."

The pale lids fell again over the blue eyes—a death-like pallor spread over the perfect features, and Nora Marsden's head sank back upon Robert Beckstaff's arm. . . .

The girl awoke to silence and to a room that was dark save for the long oblong of star-flecked blue-black that was the window. She lay for a few moments gazing at this, piecing together in her mind the tangle of the last few hours previous to her swooning. Save for a slight headache the girl was surprised, as events returned to her, to find no worse effects.

She raised herself slowly upon one elbow and gazed about the room. Now that her eyes were becoming somewhat accustomed to the darkness she was able to make out, by the pale shimmer of the stars, that

she was in a lofty-ceilinged room, with dim, shadowy furniture! and that she was lying partly dressed upon a bed facing the window. This window reached to the floor and, beyond, Nora could see the iron rails of a balcony and the foliage of plants and creepers.

She was glad that she was alone, glad that there was no well-meaning person to irritate her and to fuss over her and bathe her head with eau-de-Cologne. Here, in this quiet, dark, sweet-scented room she could, perhaps, piece together the puzzle of the necklace and of Hubert's presence at the château.

True, these two elements, disturbing as they were in themselves, were dependent one on the other. This bountiful lord, this Monte Cristo of the Château Merlains, would, of course, be the claimant of whose coming Denis had spoken when he had last come to her flat. The prodigal expenditure, the lavish display of wealth, all spoke of a man who had newly and unexpectedly acquired riches. It was quite simple, after all; in fact, if the thing were looked at coolly, the long arm of coincidence had not been unduly stretched.

What more natural than that, when arranging his fête, Monsieur Gressier should avail himself of the services of an actress who had set all London talking, and who had, by a happy chance, been "resting" in Paris, as it were, at his very doors?

What more natural than that he should allow his beautiful niece to wear the necklace that had formed part of his inheritance and that once graced the fair throat of the du Barry? Always something of a fatalist, this was to the girl but a step further in the tragedy with which her life would appear to be bound up. Even all the triumph and success that had come to her so suddenly had not had power to dispel from her mind that New Year's Eve in the vault of the Whitehall bank. That evening, she knew in her inner mind, was the turning point of her life, the pivot around which all her future would hinge. Some day, some time the mystery of Sir Hector's death would be made clear, some day Denis would be restored to her. It was Fate that had brought her to the Château Merlains and she should not be found unworthy to play the part that Fate had set for her.

Nora Marsden sat up in bed and smiled into the darkness. Really, she must look to the state of her nerves. Her sudden rise to fame, the hard work that had followed, by which she had maintained her hold upon the fickle public, the secret pain, that, even as she took her calls in the crowded theatres, ate into her heart as month had followed month and no word, no sign had come to her of the man she loved—all these had done their fell work upon her nervous system. Denis Carlairs had, after that last little letter of farewell, vanished

into the shadows, and there had been no whisper from their darkness to still the anxiety of Nora Marsden.

There had been, too, the death of old Sir Hector, and all the mystery surrounding it. Although at the inquest an open verdict had been returned there had been whisperings, cruel, slanderous innuendoes, in which the disappearance of Denis had been severely commented upon. The police had exhausted all inquiries, and there had been none to assert that Denis Carlairs had returned to The Towers upon the fatal night, no one to connect him ever so slightly with the death of his benefactor, a man whose demise could have no effect but a disastrous one upon the young man. And now, at last, it would seem as though the wheels of Fate were beginning to turn . . . things were going to happen, the curtain was about to be lifted upon a further act of the drama.

Nora was feeling better now, much better. A little air in the room and she would quickly be herself again. She slipped off the bed and crossed the room towards the window. Her silk stockings—some one had removed her shoes—made no sound as her feet sank into the heavy pile of the carpet. For a moment her fingers searched in vain for the clasp of the window, then, encountering it, Nora opened the glass doors and stepped out upon the balcony.

It was a perfect summer night, with a great

dome of sky that looked like a mass of velvet studded with spangles. Below her the gardens lay black-green, their mass broken by the white of the statues. It was late, for the lawns were deserted, and no sound came up to the girl but the chirp of insects and the tiny noises of the night. For a little while Nora stood there, one hand resting upon the slender iron rail, drinking in the cool night air and the fragrance from the dew-drenched garden. Then she turned as though to re-enter the room. As she did so there came from below the click of a window-clasp, and, looking over the rail Nora saw that a square of radiance was clearly cut upon the short turf of the lawn. Some one had opened one of the glass doors giving on to the terrace. Listening, the girl heard a chair, and then another, being dragged across the stones of the terrace. The fragrance of the gardens was mixed now with the aroma of cigar smoke. . . . Evidently some of the guests. . . .

Suddenly the little body of Nora Marsden stiffened. Hurriedly she re-entered her room, only to appear again immediately, her light dress hidden by the folds of the deep red eiderdown she had taken from the bed. She crouched among the leaves of a creeper that covered one end of the balcony; the starlight partly illuminated a face that was set and white and strained in the act of listening. A cool wind came up to her laden with the fragrance

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of the gardens and, upon the wind, a few scattered words.

And the few words she had heard might have many meanings. It was evident that she had happened upon the middle of a conversation and, without the context, it would be difficult to form an opinion. . . .

The girl rose quietly to her feet and, carefully parting the screen of creepers, made her way cautiously a few feet to the left until she was at the end of the little iron railed balcony and directly above the square of radiance cut upon the grass. Here two or three palms in small wooden tubs had been placed, and crouching in the shelter afforded by their spreading fronds, Nora bent her ear to the railing. For a little while there was no sound save the clink of a decanter against a glass and the hiss of a syphon. Then suddenly words came to her clear upon the night air.

"A bargain is a bargain, my dear fellow, and I'm not the man to give up a pound of flesh if it's due to me. Nor a ton, either."

The girl on the balcony leant slightly forward. This was Hubert Carlairs' voice without a doubt. Also, the words were harmless enough and easy of explanation. Carlairs was a banker, and in his business he would have many deals. Doubtless, among the guests of the new master of Merlains he had come across a business acquaintance, and had taken the opportunity of discussing some financial

affair with him after the other guests had retired for the night. She remembered that Denis had once told her that the bank had a branch in the Rue Scribe and a large French *clientèle*. . . . A moment later the voice again went on.

"It's all very well for you to sit there and say nothing. The game isn't all in your hands, you can lay to that. Halves it was, or, as our friends, the Yankees say, 'fifty-fifty.' Seems to me, my dear Bannister, that you have up to now managed to get a hold of the better end of the stick."

There was a light laugh, then—

"I generally do manage to get hold of as good an end as the next man, my dear Hubert."

The girl crouching among the leaves of the creeper over their heads gave a little cry, a cry which she stifled before harm was done. The reply of the man whom Sir Hubert had called Bannister was an ordinary one, and it was not its purport that caused Nora Marsden to lean forward so that no word uttered beneath might escape her. It was the voice—the silken, well-modulated voice—of Monsieur Armand Gressier, the master of Merlains.

From the dewy nest among the creepers came no movement. Tense, all her senses keyed up to their uttermost, Nora Marsden waited. The forebodings that had come upon her that evening when she had seen the necklace upon the white neck of Myra Mannering were, after all, only too well justified.

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She leant slightly more towards the railings as the sound of Gressier's soft voice came up to her again.

"There is a lot to be considered, my dear Hubert. Ours is not an ordinary business deal—the balance-sheet is a somewhat complicated affair."

Hubert Carlairs laughed shortly.

"And yet it should not be a difficult matter to strike a balance and show a profit. After that, it's simply a matter, so far as I can see, of dividing by two."

"Quite so, dear boy. But you can't divide a thing like the necklace by two. Its value goes at once. Personally, I look upon the thing as an extra, as a present, shall we say, to Myra?"

"It is her property . . . her own?"

There was silence after this, Nora could imagine that the two men were measuring each other with their eyes. Then there came to her again the sound of glass upon glass. One of the men evidently was drinking pretty deeply.

"If that's your game, Hubert, you can drop it as soon as you like. Oh, I have been blind to the looks you have given the girl—that's why you have not often been a guest at Merlains."

"Thanks."

"I want you to know, Hubert, that I did what I did, not for my sake, but for Myra's. Don't you think I don't know the danger I am running

every hour—every minute—because I have cut out all the old life—that is, all the old life except you."

"And I refuse to be shaken off, eh?"

"Oh, I don't know that I want to shake you off. I was a fool to depart from a custom of a lifetime and take a partner. However——"

"I have never said a word to you about Myra."

"No. But, my dear chap, I've got a pair of eyes and I can see through a brick wall as far as most men."

Sir Hubert grunted.

"Please understand me once and for all," Gressier went on. "We went into this game together and we will play it for all it's worth. You know my reason, Hubert—that Myra should have a straight deal in life. I want to see her honoured. I want to see her the wife of a good man. . . ."

"I should imagine that a Carlairs is as good as . . ."

"I've not a word to say against the name of Carlairs, but you are not the man I have in my mind for Myra. I've got the whip hand, remember, and have very little to lose. If we fall foul of one another what happens? I go back to the life I've always led—you go into the outer darkness. If you play square, I'll do the same. But Myra is another matter. We'll leave her out of it, I think.

Hubert, and her property as well. You can't split that up any more than you can split up—shall we say—the last will and testament of Sir Hector Carlairs? ”

Again silence. Then it was broken by a slight movement and a hissing intake of breath. For an instant the surrounding trees and statues were lit up as one of the men re-lighted his cigar. Then Hubert's voice, cold and insistent :—

“ If you would tell me precisely what it is that you are driving at, Bannister? . . . ”

“ Gressier, please. It's quite simple what I am driving at. Denis and your good self were to cut up the estate between you. I think you told me that. Am I right? ”

“ Quite; and yet I don't see what . . . ”

“ Of course you don't. I'll explain. Half the estate is laid up, as it were, there being no Denis on deck to claim. You will, or I suppose you have, taken your share.”

“ Well? ”

“ And I take it, it would not be very difficult to raise money on the other half. There's not much likelihood of Mr. Denis turning up, is there? ”

“ What do you mean? ”

“ Now, Hubert, don't get up in the bows. When I play a game I take good care to know the cards in my hand—if possible in my opponent's hand also. I understand that in a little while you will

ask leave of the courts to presume the death of your co-legatee. By the way, what have you done with . . . where is Denis? "

" Denis disappeared, as you know, at the time of my father's death."

" Very well, we'll leave it at that. What I mean to say is that we have to thank the old necklace for a lot. How did I know all this? I know, because I made it my business to know. And so we will leave the jewels and Myra out of the reckoning. I have been a scoundrel all my life, Hubert, but it was for Myra's sake I entered into this affair, and it is for her sake that I remain in it, to play the game for every cent it's worth."

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back over the tiles of the veranda. Nora Marsden raised her head, and cautiously ventured to peer over the railing. Immediately below her the two men were sitting, the glow from the lamp within the room gleaming upon the smooth black hair of Sir Hubert and upon the bald head of the older man. For a moment she watched them . . . then a movement behind her caused her to wheel sharply. In the darkness she could make out a figure, a tall, dark, weird figure, just discernible in the dim light of the stars. Nora rose to her feet.

" Miss Mannering . . . "

The tall figure swayed slightly; a white hand passed up to a whiter brow, and Nora rushed for-

ward in time to catch Myra as, with a stifled sob, she sank to the floor.

Nora Marsden, in all her vast experience of situations, could never, in the days to come, look back upon one more dramatic, more full of human emotion than that in the silent room of the Château Merlains.

The pale gleam of the stars scarcely penetrated the darkness. Upon the carpet, her white face to the sky that showed above the creepers of the balcony, lay Myra Mannering, the girl who but a short hour before had been the life and soul of the dance that had taken place in the great hall of the château. Her dark cloak had fallen apart, and the stars shone upon the white ball-dress beneath, and upon the shimmering string of pearls about the shapely throat.

Nora gazed around fearsomely. About her there loomed dim shadowy shapes, furniture of which she had no knowledge. Carefully she felt her way round the wall until she came to a dressing-table. In their passage her fingers encountered a switch for the electric light, but Nora dared not press it. A light suddenly shown here would tell the men below, if they were still there, that their conversation had been overheard; would, at any rate, serve to put them upon their guard. . . . Lightly, Nora's hands felt over the tops of the silver bottles upon the dressing-table, and at last she was rewarded.

With the phial of sal volatile in her hand, she crept noiselessly back to the window and knelt beside the recumbent form. Looking at the pale face of the girl, Nora wondered how much she had heard. She saw clearly how the things she had been listening to would re-act upon Myra Mannering. Not for one moment would she allow the thought that this girl with the pure brow and gentle manner could in any way be in league with her uncle.

In a little while her ministrations bore fruit, and, with a sigh, Myra opened her eyes. For a moment she gazed wildly about her, and then, her eyes falling upon the open window, remembrance came to her, and for one awful minute Nora thought that the girl was again about to faint. Bending low, she whispered—

“Don’t speak loud, Miss Mannering; just tell me where we can go—where we can talk. It is dangerous here to show a light.”

Faintly the reply came—

“Two doors from this . . . my room. Yes, I can walk, I think.”

Myra rose slowly to her feet, and together the two girls made their way to the door. Opening it, they stood in the dimly lit corridor, listening. From the well of the staircase there came up a shaft of light and, looking over the great oaken bannisters, Nora saw the servants extinguishing the candles in their sconces about the panelled

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walls of the square hall. Of the guests she could see none.

"It is late, I suppose, Miss Mannering?"

"I had just come up. I wanted to see if you were all right—whether you wanted anything. It is nearly dawn. I think I was the last to come upstairs."

Nora pressed the arm that rested upon her own. "How good you are." She pointed to a white door that stood slightly ajar. "That is your room, there?"

"Yes. Come."

Myra's apartment was small, but most daintily furnished. A little cluster of electric bulbs shone over the dressing-table and upon a Turkish stool stood a silver lamp and coffee service. Nora closed the door, and crossing the room drew across the window the folds of the brocaded curtains.

"How long had you been in my room, Miss Mannering? I felt faint and had gone out on to the balcony."

Myra turned and faced the actress.

"There need be no secrets between us, dear. I had been standing behind you for fully ten minutes."

"Then you heard?"

"I heard everything. I heard enough to tell me that the Château Merlains can no longer be a home for me. I heard enough to make me apologize for ever allowing you to enter such a place."

" My dear. . . "

" Oh, my awakening has come sharply, only God knows how blind I have been. Now, looking back upon my life with my uncle, I see everything so clearly. One day, Nora, I will tell you of many things, things that but for my shutting my eyes must have told me the truth. I am sorry that you should have been a witness to. . . "

Nora wheeled forward a big cushioned chair.

" Let us sit down, shall we, Myra? I may call you that, may I not? What I have heard to-night concerns me more nearly than you can think. You heard the . . . them speak of Denis? "

Myra nodded.

" Denis and I loved each other, do still love each other, if he be alive or dead. Some day I will tell you our story. That necklace you are wearing is concerned in that story. . . . Something tells me, after what I have heard to-night, that Denis is not dead. It will be my business to find out, and, if he is, to avenge him . . . What are you going to do, Myra? "

The girl buried her face in her hands.

" I . . . I don't quite know . . . I feel that I cannot see my uncle. "

" Why not come with me? "

" With you—where? "

" To Paris. Once there we can watch and find out the secret. "

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"There is no secret so far as I am concerned."

Nora crossed the room and knelt by Myra's chair.

"Forgive me, dear. I was thinking only of myself, I am afraid. But we are both of us mixed up in this. I want you to come with me. I have enough for both and I've liked you from the first moment I met you. It's a difficult situation for you, dear."

"So difficult, Nora, that I feel inclined to do as you suggest. Only Mr. Beckstaff will know where I am—he will be a friend always. Perhaps he can help to trace your Denis for you."

Nora rose from her knees and, crossing the room, pulled aside the curtains a few inches from the window.

"Look, Myra, a new day . . . a day in the new life that lies before you."

Away over the topmost branches of the trees the sky was banded with saffron, and little waves of light seemed to embrace the awakening world. In a little while the birds would be at their matins and the sun would creep up, drawing the dew from the gardens and flooding the earth with glory.

For the next hour or so the two girls sat in Myra's room each telling the other the story of her life. Silence brooded over the sleeping château, and there was no need for Myra to hurry over her simple preparations for departure. Even the servants at the

Château Merlains would sleep late after the fatigues of the ball.

Myra sat long at her little desk, penning the letter that told Robert Beckstaff of her determination, and telling him in confidence where a letter in Paris would reach her. In the two closely written pages she did not spare her uncle, although she asked Robert, for her sake, not to act in any way that would bring Thomas Bannister to justice. Together, when they had had time to consult and weigh all the facts, they would see a way whereby her uncle should return his ill-gotten gains and make reparation to those whom he had wronged. Perhaps a better way could be found than by appealing to the courts, which could not fail to raise a battle between the London and the Paris lawyers. The girl begged Beckstaff not to leave Merlains as she had done. She was safe, she wrote, and would not take any fresh step without his knowledge. His letters would be welcome, but he must post them at some office from which her address could not be traced.

A few jewels and a small amount of money, were all that Myra allowed herself to take, and these only with the strict agreement with her conscience that they should, in the fullness of time, be returned. The little clock upon her mantelpiece was chiming the half-hour after five when the girl gave a last glance round the room in which she had looked to

find such happiness and then made her way to Nora's room where the actress would be awaiting her.

And, so, the sun that morning, peering over the tree-tops, saw not alone the glowing, dew-drenched gardens of Merlains, but he saw also two young girls making their way beneath the portico of the veranda and gliding silently across the terrace to the lawns.

For all her sorrow, Myra was happy. She knew now that for long she had, in her inner mind, known that all was not well with her uncle and with the life they led. Her youth, her inexperience, her very affection for the man had blinded her, if indeed she had not wilfully closed her eyes to her suspicions.

Now the clean airs of a new morning were fanning her face, seeming to Myra to be searching her soul and sweeping it clear of all its insincerity. Before her lay a new path, a new life in which perhaps in time she might grow to forget, if not to forgive, her uncle. It was as though she had been labouring long beneath a load, a load that she had now cast by the wayside.

That the man had sinned for her sake she did not consider to be an excuse, if indeed she believed it. A man does not suddenly take to ways of crime for the sake of his sister's child. Looking back, Myra saw only too well the life that it had pleased Thomas Bannister to live. To tell Hubert that this vile

life was lived for her sake was an insult as much to her as to Hubert's intelligence. By leaving him, Myra was giving him the one chance to make atonement. Had Bannister been sincere in saying that he had sinned for her, her absence would remove that consideration and leave the path of regeneration open and clear before him. No longer would he be able to hug to his soul the comforting thought that the evil that he did was not for his own sake. He would know now that Myra, if ever she should forgive him, would never touch another penny that her uncle's misdeeds brought to him. If Bannister continued to sin it would be for his own sake.

Swiftly, the two girls crossed the lawn and entered the path that led through the plantation to the gates. At the edge of the little wood Myra paused and looked back.

The stately towers of Merlains rose proudly into the blue of the summer sky. Against the grey slate of the Mansard roof a flight of white pigeons fluttered. The windows were curtained, and Myra thought of Hubert and her uncle sleeping off the festivities of the day before. To the girl, the noble proportions of the château, its sculptured grace, set her thinking of a great whited sepulchre, a tomb behind whose purity man hid his sins and his corruption.

Without a word the girl turned and rejoined Nora Marsden, who was awaiting her within the wood.

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Through the shade of the leafy alley-ways they passed and so gained the road—the white high road that ran between its rows of poplars and gleaming meadows towards Louviers, with its already smoking chimneys . . . towards Louviers . . . and Paris.

CHAPTER III

LETTERS FOR MONSIEUR GRESSIER

THE world was well awake before, one by one, the silken blinds of the Château Merlains were drawn up to admit the sun of the perfect summer morning. Pert little chambermaids joked lightly with the sleepy-eyed valets as they passed them on the soft carpet of the corridors, bearing ewers of hot water or trays upon which were set out dainty *café complet*. From below stairs came the thousand-and-one distinct sounds that denote an awakening household, the hissing of taps, the crackling of newly lighted fires.

In a small corner room upon the second floor, the windows of which looked towards Louviers, Robert Beckstaff sat up and yawned luxuriously. To the healthy young Englishman the five hours that were all that the festivities had left of the night had been all sufficient in restoring his energy, although he knew it would be a good couple more before the guests would begin to dribble, in ones and twos, into the great dining-hall, there to exchange matutinal greetings and toy with coffee and the dainty cold viands of the buffet breakfast.

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Robert Beckstaff was at no loss as to how he should spend those two hours of glorious morning. Jules should bring him a cup of chocolate and a roll, quite enough to stay his hunger until, at noon, the elaborate *déjeuner* would be served in the marquee on the south lawn. Then, after the chocolate and roll, Jules should bring him a dressing-gown and slippers and a rough towel; a mile walk would follow, to a meadow of which Robert Beckstaff had many pleasant morning memories, a meadow all aglow with kingcups, and that sloped so invitingly down to the limpid waters of the Eure.

He sprang from the bed and threw wider the doors of the window, and stepped out on to the little circular balcony that gave so wonderful a bird's-eye view of the surrounding country.

What a morning to wake up to, what a world in which to live! The lightly flecked sky, in which a lark was fluttering and bursting its little throat in song canopied a vista of meadow and river, of waving heavy-eared corn and rolling woodlands and shadow-stained hillsides.

"Jules."

He turned and re-entered the room as he heard the servant putting his shaving-water and tray ready. The man bowed—also he yawned behind his hand. What had been good enough for the master had been good enough for the man, and so open-handed a monsieur as the master of Merlains

would never miss a bottle or two of wine. In other words the festivities of the night before had re-echoed in the servants' hall with results decidedly detrimental to the domestic workings of the château.

"Jules, I'm going to bathe. I'll want a towel and things."

"Yes, monsieur."

Jules looked vacantly at the athletic young man, veiling the dismay that threatened to show in his eyes. They were all mad, these sons of Albion, whose greatest pleasure in life would appear to be to plunge themselves into cold water. He turned with a suppressed shudder at the thought of the river. At the door he paused.

"There is a letter for monsieur."

The mad Englishman was throwing his arms about his head and twisting his torso vigorously in the throes of physical drill. He paused at "Position Three" of the exercise.

"A letter, Jules? I thought the post did not reach Merlains until nine?"

"It does not, monsieur. I found it on the hall table as I came up. It is from some one in the house."

The man pointed to the tray containing the coffee and rolls, and left the room to attend to the details of this strange business of towels.

Left alone, Beckstaff walked to the tray. The letter was propped up against the silver coffee-pot.

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One glance told the young man that Myra was the sender. He paused a moment before he took it up. There was something about the envelope that caused a grip as of chill hands about his heart.

Scientists can assert what they will, but there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in their philosophy. If any one had told Robert Beckstaff a moment before that a lifeless envelope could become a sentient thing he would have prescribed a tonic for the teller. Now, however, he could have believed anything. Rightly, he should have been glad to see awaiting him upon this most perfect of mornings a letter from the girl he loved. And yet. . . .

He picked up the envelope and slit it open with the little silver butter-knife. As he read, the healthy glow forsook his cheek, and he sank down limply upon the edge of the bed from which he had just sprung so joyfully. Twice he read the two closely written pages, then sat with the letter hanging limply, his eyes fixed upon space.

For Robert Beckstaff, the glory of the morning had departed. Outside, the sky was still blue, still the lark fluttered and sang, the sun still gloried the meadows, but in the heart of the young man it was night and storm and darkness.

Jules entered with the towels, and seeing the young man so preoccupied, noiselessly withdrew. Something had happened, something had sobered for the moment the mad Englishman.

And as Robert Beckstaff sat there he thought of little things, of unconsidered trivialities that were but awaiting their moment to take toll of the man who had passed them by. It is only when the big things of life come along that we heed those little things that, had we cared to note them, might have pointed the way.

They crowded now into his brain with their cries of "I told you so." The daily life of his employer took on a new significance. Gressier had not always acted as a descendant of a noble French family would act, and his tales of his life in Canada had not always rung true, had lacked conviction. But Beckstaff had not heeded, putting down any discrepancies to forgetfulness or to mistakes. Life had been so pleasant at Merlains with Myra that he had not looked as deeply as he might have done—or rather, as he should have done. It is so easy always to take without question the good things Fate holds out to us, never questioning their origin or whether we have a right to them or not.

The man looked again at the paper hanging listlessly between his knees, and as he did so his eyes lighted upon another paper, an envelope that had slipped from the one he had opened and had fallen upon the carpet at his feet. He picked it up and read the superscription—

"TO MY UNCLE."

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Beckstaff turned it over in his hand. At any rate, it showed him where his way lay. The first step, even before he went to Paris to see Myra, must be the delivery of this letter. Gressier would be in his study in an hour, and Beckstaff said he would be there before him. Gone now were all thoughts of the dip in the river. Instead, he left the château by a small door giving on to the kitchen gardens, and, passing through these, came out in a dense and unfrequented part of the plantation. Here, in company with his pipe, he paced the overgrown paths thinking deeply. From time to time he took Myra's letter from his pocket and read a few words. She would by this time be well upon her way to Paris and yet he must remain tied here in Merlains. He wondered why Myra had not told him to follow her, surely after their talk of love it was his right, his duty to be by her side. He felt that he must obey her, must act exactly as she wished him to act. In a little while he would see Bannister and be guided by circumstances as to his future actions.

The clock over the garage was striking the half-hour after ten when Thomas Bannister descended the wide staircase from his room. The festivities of the night had had but little effect upon this man, to whom late hours were no novelty. He was dressed in a light grey flannel suit, and in his button-hole was pinned a freshly picked rose. As he entered the study he was whistling. And so, as is

the way with all the great moments in life, Thomas Bannister's great moment found him unprepared.

"Morning, Beckstaff . . . mail in yet?"

Gressier always referred to the post as "mail." It was one of the little things he had taught himself when he acquired his Western accent.

"This moment come in, Monsieur Gressier."

Beckstaff let his eyes rest upon the master of Merlains, although his head was bent over the papers on his desk. The letter that Gressier took up first was not Myra's, but one that had come in by the post and that the secretary had placed with the other letters. Beckstaff, watching, was surprised at the effect this communication had upon his employer. Gressier read it in silence—it was but short—and hurriedly slipped it into the side pocket of his loose jacket. A curious look had come into his eyes, and the thin lips had been for a moment so compressed as to appear bloodless. If Beckstaff had needed confirmation of the evil in Thomas Bannister's life the lips and eyes of the man at that moment would have supplied it. Then the master of Merlains took up Myra's envelope. This communication also was short, and the effect upon the reader of it was instantaneous.

Gressier rose from his seat with an oath. One hand plucked at his throat as though he were choking, then with an effort he seemed to regain his composure. It was as though he knew what it would mean were he to let go of his senses while

the letter was not destroyed. He reeled rather than walked to the fireplace, waving back Beckstaff who had risen and would have gone to his assistance. Kneeling, he took matches from his pocket and set light to the letter, watching while it was consumed, and afterwards breaking up the ashes with his hand. Then, as though he had been waiting until this act of safety was accomplished, he gave a little gasp and sank back upon the white skin rug.

Beckstaff ran to him and remained for a few moments looking down upon the impostor. The face was grey and lined and inexpressibly vile. With the going of consciousness the mask would seem to have fallen from the man's soul leaving it bare for all the world to read its grim secret. The secretary loosened the cravat at his throat and walked to the desk, upon which stood a carafe of water. This he poured over his handkerchief and dabbed the forehead of the unconscious man. Then, knowing Gressier for what he was, he placed his hand in the coat pocket and drew out the letter that the man had read first that morning. It was upon cheap paper, and the writing was careless rather than illiterate—

"Unless you want things to happen, I would advise you to be in the road near the station at eight to-morrow night. No need to sign this, as you will know me when you see me. . . ."

Beckstaff thrust the letter into his pocket. Time enough to finish reading and to think of what to do when he had seen that Gressier had attention.

He crossed the room, and opening the door called for assistance.

Time
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CHAPTER IV

THE ROAD BY THE STATION

THE news of the indisposition of the master of Merlains had at least one good effect. The guests, only too anxious to get away from a place where gaiety had been so rudely changed into gloom, set about preparations for departure at once, and in the scramble for time-tables and for the services of maids to pack trunks Myra was forgotten, or, if she was remembered, it was only to suppose that she was herself indisposed or that she was ministering to the wants of the man who had been taken to that shaded room in the west wing.

In his efforts to speed the parting guests Robert Beckstaff had not been idle, although it was late in the afternoon when the last car had rolled away from the porch and Merlains was at peace. Then and not till then, did he think of the letter that he had taken from Gressier's pocket and thrust into his own only partly read. Sitting upon the terrace he took it from his pocket and resumed its reading—

*... It was seeing you in the Café d'Harcourt
that put me wise. 'Bannister and a swell' I*

thought, and I acted on that. The swell I found was a banker (shall we say H. C. ?). I followed up what looked like being a profitable affair. That is always my way. I found that H. had a brother (shall we say D. ?). In my little way I got to know where D. is at the moment. Any use to you, eh ? Shall D. be told everything, or shall I sell information to "Gressier le Bannister" ? You know me, Tom, and it doesn't matter a tinker's curse where I sell my wares. It's the best market for me all the time. No sentiment—just cash—and from all I can hear cash is pretty plentiful in certain quarters just now. And so, it's the station road at eight to-morrow night for yours truly."

Beckstaff folded the letter as it had been folded before and looked up. Jules was approaching him from the dining-room.

"Monsieur Gressier is asking for you, monsieur."

Beckstaff rose at once and followed the man, followed him through a long corridor to the west wing, and to a darkened room. The doctor who had been summoned from Louviers rose from his chair by the bedside and, bowing to Beckstaff, left the room. The secretary approached the bed and looked down upon the white face upon the pillow.

"You are better, Monsieur Gressier ?"

Bannister smiled feebly.

"Didn't think I would act like a girl, Beckstaff ? I wonder whether I took too much wine last

night . . . I . . . I wanted you. Give me my coat, will you? It's there on the chair. The one I was wearing this morning."

Beckstaff walked across the dim room and took the light flannel coat from the chair where it had been hurriedly thrown by the valet when the man had undressed the stricken master. And the dimness of the room served Beckstaff well in that he was able to replace the letter in the pocket before he handed the coat to the man on the bed.

Then the secretary drew back in the shadow of the curtain and watched while the sick man, with fingers that trembled in their eagerness, felt in the side-pocket. He drew out the letter and, asking Beckstaff to draw the curtain from one of the windows, he read it. Then he beckoned Beckstaff to come close to him. For a moment it seemed as though he was experiencing difficulty as to how to begin, then—

"I want you to do something for me," he said.

Beckstaff signified his willingness, and the other went on.

"There is a—a friend of mine, Beckstaff, who has made an appointment to meet me this evening. You know the road by the station?"

"Yes."

"He will be there at eight. A short, dark, somewhat foreign-looking man. I want you to go in my place and keep the appointment. Tell

him that I am unwell, but that I will see him in Paris this day week at the café he mentions in his letter. I want you to go, Beckstaff, to prevent him coming here to the château. You are a man of the world, Beckstaff, and you must know that with great wealth there comes always enemies. Friends one has had in less prosperous days . . . You understand? "

" Quite."

" This is one of them, Beckstaff, a nice enough fellow in his way, but hardly the companion one wants now. You will use discretion, I know."

" I'll take the greatest care, monsieur. At eight o'clock, you said? "

" Yes. By the way, Beckstaff, Myra has gone to London upon some business of mine. We must do the best we can without her, eh, Beckstaff? "

The secretary swallowed the lie.

" It will be lonely," he said. " The guests have all gone."

" All? "

" Except Sir Hubert Carlairs. By the way, he has been asking to see you."

Bannister was silent for a moment.

" Tell him, Beckstaff, will you, that I will see him, here—at eight? That will leave you free to do as I have asked. You understand that I want secrecy? "

" Quite, monsieur."

" Then go down and tell Sir Hubert, will you?

Besides, I want to sleep . . . or think. Good-night, Beckstaff."

"Good-night, Monsieur Gressier."

With the sudden end to the festivities at the Château Merlains, it would seem that the god of the weather had ceased to take any further beneficent interest in the matter. The gardens, seen from the windows of the château were sombre and grey beneath lowering skies, and the canvas of the marquees flapped dismally in a wind that sighed through the plantation and spoke plainly of rain to come.

When, a few minutes before eight that evening, Robert Beckstaff approached the little station of Massey-sur-Eure it was but dark; the clouds that had been gathered over the hills all day since noon had descended and become more dense; the wind had increased to half a gale and whistled up from the valley of the river.

Beckstaff paused a few hundred yards short of the station, and took his seat upon a bank by the roadside. The road here was straight, and he had an uninterrupted view of the station approach and of the courtyard of the little café facing the station. The windows of the inn showed crimson through the blinds, and in the courtyard but a few of the tables were occupied. It was well after eight before Robert saw the man whom he had come to meet.

He came from a copse on the left by the station,

a small plantation of firs, and stood for a moment looking up and down the level stretch of road. If he saw Beckstaff, he did not allow his eyes to rest upon him. He lit a cigarette and sauntered away in the direction of the inn. A moment later Robert rose and followed. He caught up with the other as he was entering the courtyard.

"You are looking for Monsieur Gressier?"

The man drew back a pace and regarded Beckstaff with a certain amount of curiosity and perhaps a little fear.

He was a short swarthy man dressed cheaply and rather flashily. A dark green hat of soft felt was perched with a tilt upon his oiled black hair and an imitation diamond adorned his red tie. He strove to cloak the fear that had sprung into his eyes with an assumption of swagger.

"And you?"

"I am a friend of Monsieur Gressier's. That gentleman is unable to keep the appointment. I have a message from him for you."

The other did not answer at once. He had turned from the inn as though he sought privacy and was making his way slowly again up the road, Beckstaff by his side.

"My business with Monsieur Gressier is private," he said. "How am I to know that you are a friend of his?"

Beckstaff laughed. He had in his mind plans of his own, and the sooner he had done with this

sinister-looking man the better it would be for those same plans. He answered with a laugh.

"You're not very polite. I said I had a message. After I have delivered it I will leave you. Personally I won't be sorry."

The man was about to murmur an apology, but Beckstaff cut him short.

"The message I had to give you was that Monsieur Gressier is unable, quite unable, to meet you this evening, but he tells me that if you will be this day week at the same time in the café in the Latin Quartier, where you saw him once before, he will be there. Also, he suggested that he would be prepared to satisfy any reasonable demands."

The other man laughed shortly.

"And what does Monsieur Gressier mean by reasonable demands?"

"I am not here as Monsieur Gressier's agent. I am merely a messenger. . . . Good-evening."

He turned and walked off at a quicker pace up the road that led back to Merlains. For a moment the stranger made as though he would follow, then as though thinking better of it he turned and sauntered back to the café.

It was of no possible interest to Robert Beckstaff whether the man was pleased with the message or otherwise. It had been no part of his promise to Gressier that he should argue his case, and he certainly had no desire to protract his interview with the man he had just left. The message was to

be delivered; after that, Gressier and his affairs could look after themselves. It was time for him now to act upon a plan of his own.

The first part of this plan would seem to be to walk without a head-turn back in the direction of the château. About a quarter of a mile up the road the way wound through a small wood, and here Beckstaff paused. It was now quite dark in the wood, and even on the high road there was but little light left to the day.

Beckstaff turned where a small track led away into the dimness of the trees. Here, after a walk of a hundred yards, he stooped over a bush and drew out a bundle, a bundle which any observer who might have been on the watch would have seen him place there an hour previously, when he was on his way to the station. It contained a light tweed cap and a pair of brown shoes, the whole tied up in a rain-coat of dark brown. A few moments were all that were necessary to effect a change, and when a quarter of an hour later, a man entered the Café du Dome and asked for wine, there were none who could, by the remotest stretch of imagination, assert that he was the man who but thirty minutes before had been loitering on the road.

Beckstaff noticed that the stranger was seated at a table in the corner of the courtyard, and that he still appeared to be watching the road, as though his work was not yet done. Of the entry of Beckstaff he took no heed; neither, to the latter's surprise,

did he leave to catch the train that at nine o'clock left to join the connection at Louviers for Paris. There would be no more trains that night, and Beckstaff wondered whether the stranger was waiting till a later hour to visit the château upon his own initiative and endeavour to gain a hearing with the master.

It would be about ten o'clock, and Beckstaff was wondering whether it were wise to wait longer, when a man came walking down the road from the direction of the château. He paused at the entrance to the courtyard, among the shadows, and gave a low whistle. The stranger finished his wine and left, following the new-comer to a spot about fifty yards away. For the better part of a quarter of an hour the two stood in conversation clearly to be seen from the café, then they parted, the new-comer returning to the entrance to the courtyard, the man who had written to Gressier walking up the road in the direction of Louviers at a smart pace.

To follow was out of the question, and Beckstaff devoted his powers of observation to the man who had lately arrived. This was a tallish fellow in a long coat, well buttoned up at the neck, and who wore a hat drawn down over the eyes. He stopped for a moment in indecision at the entrance to the Café du Dome, then, making up his mind, entered and took his seat at a table near which the other had been seated. From his seat behind a corner of the arbour, Beckstaff watched.

The man ordered a bottle of wine, and, on it being brought to him, filled a glass, tilting back his head as he drank it off. Beckstaff could hardly keep back the cry that came to his lips. This was no stranger, this man who, having slaked his thirst, was engaged in counting a roll of banknotes he had taken from his pocket. Eagerly he leant over them, wetting his finger and turning the corners of the notes, gloating as misers gloat, over their hoards. Beckstaff rose softly, and keeping in the shadow, advanced to the preoccupied man. He laid a hand on his shoulder. The man clutched at his notes and looked up with an oath. Beckstaff smiled.

"Well, Roberts, I didn't expect to meet you here. I suppose Sir Hubert Carlairs gave you the evening off. Of course, he is engaged with Monsieur Gressier, is he not? A warm evening, Roberts. As it's a dark road perhaps we had better walk home together. Oh, don't hurry, I'll smoke a cigarette while you finish your wine. On the way back to Merlains, Roberts, you and I are going to have a chat—a nice, confidential chat."

For perhaps a hundred yards after leaving the Café du Dome Roberts walked beside Beckstaff in silence. The way was dark, for to-night there were no stars, and the wooded banks of the road hemmed the two men in with impenetrable gloom. More than once Roberts cleared his throat as though he would speak, but it was the secretary who at last broke the silence.

"I have been wondering, Roberts, whether threats or promises are the better weapons with which to fight a man like you?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you are not to be judged by the ordinary standard of honour among thieves. I am going to have the whole story out of you, and I don't care what means I use to get it. I know that the man you were speaking to a little while ago knows all about Mr. Denis Carlairs. I judge, also, that you know where that gentleman is. You are a smart man, Roberts, in your way, and it isn't likely you are ignorant of any of your master's secrets that may be financially useful to you. Men such as you are faithful to your masters up to a point. Then you go to pieces. I think you've reached that point now, Roberts, and the first thing for you to do is to tell me where Mr. Denis Carlairs is at this moment."

"I don't know, sir."

"Oh, yes, you do. Listen; it's going to be worth your while to tell me all you know. Sir Hubert's reign is nearly over, and when the blow falls you will be better out of the way. From what I have seen I don't think you will want to be on deck when the police are making inquiries. And I can tell you that the police are going to get busy with Sir Hubert Carlairs before he's many months older. . . . Also, I'll see that you are paid."

The two men walked on in silence. They had

come to the bend in the road that led to Merlains. Afar off, between the trees, the lights of the château splashed the darkness. Beckstaff stopped.

"I may as well tell you, Roberts, that you are not going back to Merlains to-night. You see, you are a suspicious character, and I know my duty to Monsieur Gressier. I am going to be busy the next few days, and I don't want you in the way. Do you know what I'm going to do with you, Mr Roberts?"

"With me, sir?"

"Yes, with you. I am going to give you, here and now, a hundred francs—although I must say you appear to have plenty of money. After you have told me your story you are going back to Louviers. There is a train to Rouen at ten, and at Rouen you should catch the train that leaves Paris at nine-twenty for Dieppe. By to-morrow morning you will be in London."

"And what if I refuse?"

"You are not going to refuse, Roberts. Listen to the rest of the programme. I will post a letter in the morning to you at the post office at Charing Cross. It will contain a cheque on my bank in London for fifty pounds. This is for you to spend as you like; all I ask is that for seven days you write each day to me, care of Cook's, Place de l'Opéra, Paris. In that way I shall be tolerably certain that you are in London, and that I am comparatively safe from interruption. Look."

Beckstaff took from his pocket a roll of bills and selected ten of ten francs each. Lighting a match he held them before the eyes of the man-servant.

"Do I hear the story, Roberts?"

Roberts took the money.

"It isn't much to tell sir. It seems my best way. Shall we walk on?"

"Yes. Or rather, I'll walk back a little way with you. I wouldn't like you to miss that train to Rouen, Roberts."

"Very well, sir. It's this way. I acted for Sir Hubert back there in England. I've acted for him, sir, in many little games. I wouldn't tell you, sir, only that you know all about him. Sir Hubert has always been trying to find out something against Mr. Denis, and he found it one night at The Towers. Something about a necklace it was, but I didn't hear the rights of it. It was bad enough, anyway, to make Mr. Denis leave the house that night, and the next day he crossed the Channel to Havre. It was his intention to sail from there in one of the French boats to America. But that wasn't good enough for Sir Hubert. We followed him to Havre to see that the news of Sir Hector's death did not reach him. We beat the news by about five hours."

"What difference did Sir Hector's death make?"

"Well, Mr. Beckstaff, my master is a deep one. He thought that if he could silence Mr. Denis and keep him hidden the young man would be accused

or suspected of the killing. If, on the other hand, he heard of it, Mr. Denis would come back hot-foot to clear himself—he was that sort of gentleman—and Sir Hubert didn't want any more publicity than he could help."

"And what happened?"

"Sir Hubert and me, sir, got in touch with a gang of roughs in Havre, and Mr. Denis was shanghaied the night we arrived in one of those dark little streets near the quay. The next day a car had taken him to Paris, and he's been there ever since."

"Mr. Denis in Paris?"

"Yes, sir, in a little house belonging to one of the gang off the Rue du Amandiers, Passage Fremaire. That is all I know, sir?"

"And it's all I want to know just now, Roberts. Now, hurry for that train, and if I find you've communicated with the man you were talking to just now it'll be the worse for you. Who is he, by the way?"

"Man of the name of Dusker, sir—Charles Dusker. Him and me have worked a few tricks together. We're pals, and we share and share alike. I put Dusker wise on the Denis affair, and he's bleeding Sir Hubert white, also he's trying the same game on with Gressier. Funny situation, ain't it, sir? What do you think?"

"I think Roberts, that it's time you were off that train. I imagine you know upon which

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your bread is buttered. Also I think that you
the biggest scoundrel unhung.

"Thanks, Mr. Beckstaff, for the compliment.
Yes, I think it's time I caught that train. I'll call
at Charing Cross all right for the present. Good night,
Mr. Beckstaff."

The secretary stood watching the dark form of
Roberts upon the road until darkness swallowed it.
Then he turned and walked slowly in the direction
of the Château Merlains.

CHAPTER V

A DOUBLE GAME

THE lamp with its green shade cast a circle of light upon the papers on a desk drawn up between the windows of the room in the west wing of the château, the room to which the master of Merlains was confined. Bannister was sitting with his head bent, writing methodically and slowly upon a sheet of foolscap. At times he would pause as though for thought or inspiration, and at such times he would raise his head and the glow through the green glass of the shade showed ghastly thin drawn features. In a few hours Mr. Thomas Bannister had become as an old man. In a few short hours the fabric of his future had fallen about his ears, burying amid its ruins the hopes of a man who, world-weary and well on in years, had no strength left to him to build anew.

In some undefined way he knew that, for him, the sun would no more shine, that, after this, his life must be spent in the outer darkness, without hope, without love. Perhaps he would go back to his old ways, to the only method of making money

he knew. What else was there for him to do? And what a life that would be now; he would become a drawer of water and hewer of wood in a world in which he had once reigned as king. From the pinnacles of crime he would descend to the by-ways; for him no more the grand adventure that called for quickness of brain and purpose, by petty pilfering he would live, preying upon the weak. . . . Or, perhaps, out of the wreck that he saw coming upon him he might be able to scrape together enough to provide for a bare living in some second-rate *pension* in an obscure Italian town. And then there would be always the thought of his niece. . . .

Myra's letter to her uncle had been final. Her one hope that he might be able to explain and clear himself was, she had known even as she had written, a vain one. In the world of deceit in which Thomas Bannister had lived there was no hope, no appeal when the corner-stone had failed him. All the courage, the self-reliance that continued success had given him failed him in his hour of need. Thomas Bannister had reached the end of his tether.

And yet it was not entirely of himself that he was thinking as he sat in the darkened room alone with his misery. There was in the cosmos of Thomas Bannister the fatality so common with the man who takes a risk, and the end found him unmoved. In such a way the hardened criminal ascends the scaffold with unfaltering step.

The clock over the mantel chimed the hour of eight, and Bannister rose from his seat. He was wearing a dark blue dressing-gown that made him appear taller than in reality he was, and he walked slowly as one who is recovering from an illness. Although it was still far from dark he pulled the heavy curtains across the windows. As he did so he paused and gazed sadly down upon the darkening gardens, upon the earthly paradise that he had built for Myra and himself, the safe backwater of life in which he had hoped to spend the evening of his days, in which he had hoped to see the niece he loved blossom out into perfect womanhood, shielded from the storms that he himself had spent his life in battling. And now. . . .

Thomas Bannister drew the last curtain over the window. The brass rings clattered noisily upon the pole. Then he seated himself again at his desk and took up his pen. And so the better part of an hour passed.

Leaning forward so that the light from the lamp fell upon the paper, the man commenced to read carefully what he had written. From time to time he reached for his pen and erased or altered a word in the construction of a sentence—

“ MY DEAR MYRA ” (he read),—“ If, indeed, I have not forfeited the right to address you in this way—I am writing this to you as I do not think I will ever

in this world come again face to face with you. How bitter that thought is to me I will leave you to guess. And, in guessing, I want you to put from your mind all the things you have heard of me, all the terrible things that I dare not deny. I want you to remember only what I have been to you during the years since your mother died. I have loved you, Myra, as I have loved none other in my life. Always I have regarded my fellow man and woman as being in the world merely for my exploitation, and so, perhaps, when at last, one came into my life that was different, I loved too much. Will it make you more bitter towards me or more lenient when I, taking the coward's way, tell you that in all my sinning I have had your welfare in my mind? Each *coup* that I brought off ! looked upon as a nest egg to be laid aside against the time when my hand would have lost its cunning. You, I said, should be provided for though the heavens fell. Well, they have fallen, and I am buried beneath the ruins. I know now what bitter Dead Sea fruit is that which I have garnered up. I know in my own mind that you will not benefit, rather would you die than touch a penny piece that has come to you through me. And yet a little while and all would have been well, a little step further and the goal would have been reached.

"I have lain awake night after night, Myra, in the flat in the Rue Richelieu, lain awake, scheming

. . . scheming, deeming no roguery too base so that it brought grist to the mill. And when, during the last few weeks, my mind has been at rest on this score, still have I lain awake. In my great room here at Merlains I have watched the dawn creep in between the blinds after a sleepless night planning . . . planning as to how best I should spend and invest so that you should never know what it was like to rub against life's rough edges. Were things different from what they are we would have laughed over these dream pictures, Myra—laughed at the wonderful houses that I was to build for you, the wonderful jewels that I would hang about your throat. I had picked out a husband too for you, not in the flesh—I doubt, indeed, whether there exists so brave a knight as I dreamt for you. In all my dreamings I saw you a radiant figure, honoured above all women. I saw you the mother of sturdy children. . . .

“And yet all these castles have come falling to the ground and we are left wandering among ruins. I wonder what fate has in store for us two. I will not go back to the old life, Myra, that much I promise you for your comfort alone and with no hope that the promise may touch your heart to forgiveness. After this my life will be honest, and I pray that I may be spared to work out my reformation. But you . . . what is to become of you?

"The thought, Myra, is torture. I suppose you have gone to Paris—Paris, the city that waits lurking to destroy. I think of you in that vast hive of temptation, and my brain reels almost to madness." . . .

"Sorry I'm late, Gressier."

The man at the desk looked up from his reading and laid a sheet of blotting paper carefully over what he had written.

"Ah, Hubert, I expected you at eight. But it doesn't matter. I think a little talk is due between us. Things have happened since last night. Sit down."

Sir Hubert crossed the room and, drawing aside the curtain threw wide open the window.

"How hot you are in here, Bannister. Oh, I forgot you are an invalid. Window too much for you?"

"No—leave it open."

From the gardens came the rustling of foliage and the faint moan of a wind that spoke of a coming storm. The breeze entered the room, stirring the flame of the lamp and the loose papers upon the desk. Gressier looked anxiously at the blotter. The young man had flung himself into a large chintz-covered chair, and had lighted a cigar. To the most casual observer it was clear that Sir Hubert Carlairs had sat long

over his wine. He came to the point with brutal frankness.

" Things have happened since last night, my dear Bannister. I wanted to know what you have done with Myra."

Gressier laughed.

" I will repeat my question of last night, Hubert. What have you done with Denis? "

Sir Hubert rapped out an oath.

" That's beside the question. Denis is no affair of yours—Myra is of mine. I thought I made it clear that I was going to honour Miss Mannering by asking her to become Lady Carlairs. I am willing to overlook your rudeness to me last night."

" I beg your pardon—you said ' honour ' ! "

" Yes, Bannister, I said ' honour.' Oh, I know how you think about it, you think that Myra is too good for me. The niece of a criminal too good for Sir Hubert Carlairs, eh? Strange, upon my soul! Look here, Bannister, let's talk this thing out thoroughly. I'll give you my word that I will cut out all the bad parts of my life. Myra's position in London will be of the best."

" I know you, Hubert, as I know myself. Men like us can't throw off the devil's cloak all at once."

Sir Hubert laughed.

" This is a compliment, surely, from such a man

as Thomas Bannister." The man leant forward in his chair. "Look here, it's plain we don't think a lot of each other—frankly I don't trust you a little bit. Wouldn't it be as well that Myra should be, as it were, a common bond between us, a sheet anchor?"

"And, as your father-in-law, you imagine you could make your own terms with me, eh?"

Sir Hubert sprang up.

"You lie! They are talking downstairs, and they say that the young mistress has left the château. Earlier in the day the story was that she was here nursing you."

Bannister shrugged his shoulders.

"For once the folk below stairs are partly right. Myra has left the château—but I have not seen her since I bade her good-night after the dance . . . and kissed her."

"There's some devil's work here." Sir Hubert was pacing up and down the room. "You are hiding her so that I shall not——"

Gressier raised a thin, aristocratic hand. Unlike the younger man, he was perfectly cool.

"Sit down, Hubert. Really you ought to leave that '47 Port alone. It isn't the tippie for a man who is not used to it. You play a double game, I know, and the teetotal Sir Hubert should beware of these sudden indulgences, alcohol has a nasty way of getting back on a man. Now, perhaps I can

say a few words. You have had things rather to yourself since you came in, haven't you? "

He reached across the table and took a cigarette from the silver box. He tapped the little tube thoughtfully upon the palm of his hand.

" We'll take things quietly, Hubert, if you don't mind. I never did like noise and I'm a little shaken up, as you know. Firstly, Myra has found out the secret of her devoted uncle's life. I have a letter here from her, but I won't show it to you. It's too sacred. But I can tell you that no power in heaven or earth can bring my niece back to me. Perhaps you think I'm taking the blow quietly. It's always the way when a blow is crushing—it's the irritating little pin-pricks of life that set us squealing, not the big things. Secondly, I'm out of the game for good and all; it's all I can do, and there is just the ghost of a chance that years of repentance will bring reward. You follow me? "

Sir Hubert, who had shown in his face the consternation he felt as Gressier began speaking, wheeled suddenly.

" You say that Myra knows? "

" Yes, Hubert. It's always the way with men who play our sort of game. Our little talk last night was overheard."

" By Myra? "

Bannister nodded.

" It seems that Miss Marsden, when she fainted

was carried to a room above the billiard room, not to her own apartment. She was on the balcony when you and I had our little talk. So was Myra who had gone to see if she wanted anything. . . . And now we come to the third point. It's one that will appeal to you more than the other two. The others are personal to me; this takes you in. The point is that we are in the hands, very capable hands, too, of the most successful blackmailer in Paris. Ah, I thought that would make you sit up! Read that."

From the pocket of his dressing-gown he took the letter he had received that morning. He passed it over to Sir Hubert.

"You remember him, Hubert?"

"There's no signature."

"There's none required. Do you remember the little dark man who sat near us in the Café d'Harcourt that night? Seems he knows quite a bit."

Sir Hubert allowed the letter to drop from his nerveless hands. All his braggart air had gone; again he needed the support and the advice of the keener brain. The other went on—

"I never really have had Dusker altogether out of my mind. You know, I was aware of the little rat's method of work. Bannister in the company of a banker in the Café d'Harcourt was quite enough to set Dusker's brain working. I'll bet he knew our movements pretty well after we left the café

that night and has followed them ever since. He'd worry it out bit by bit and inch by inch until he saw where he came in. I always did think a lot of Dusker and his methods."

"What are you going to do, Bannister? What . . ."

The wind among the trees took a new and a higher note, and the curtains at the window billowed into the room like a sail that takes the breeze. The papers on the desk rustled and swayed, and a sheet of Bannister's letter to Myra that had been covered by the blotting-paper fluttered to the carpet at Hubert's feet. He bent and picked it up, and was about to replace it on the table when he caught sight of Bannister. And there was something in the sunken eyes that made him glance at the writing. A moment later he had backed away from the other man, the paper held behind him. He was laughing through his teeth.

Eyes were upon eyes, and in the dim-lit room was no sound save the tick-tick-tock of the Sheraton clock above the mantelpiece. And then, after a few moments reading, the younger man laughed again. It was a low, throaty laugh, mirthless and full of sinister significance.

"So I'm not the only one to play a double game eh, Bannister?"

Sir Hubert's voice had again taken on the aggressive tone that it had for an instant abandoned.

He reached out a hand and drew his chair back so that half the room lay between it and Thomas Bannister. Then he sat down. Again there came that mirthless laugh.

"A most interesting document, I have no doubt. The opening paragraph is most promising. Quite literary. It looks uncommonly like a confession, and confessions are generally quaint reading. I always read them in the newspapers—damnably whining most of them are. Now, I wonder whether you have been whining and imagining that putting your misdeeds on paper will give you a short cut to heaven? I wonder, too, whether Thomas Bannister has done his friends the honour of including their names in this history of his awful past? I shall feel hurt, Bannister, really I shall, if you have taken all the laurels to yourself. . . . No, sit where you are, Bannister."

For the master of Merlains, stung into action by the sneer in the voice of his fellow-conspirator, and by the sudden way the whip had changed hands, had half risen. At Hubert's words he paused, and, looking, saw that those words were backed by an automatic which Carlairs had produced.

"Somehow," the cool, sneering voice went on, "I had an idea that things might happen this evening. I didn't tell you why I was late, did I? It was because I didn't get back from Louviers till an hour ago. I went to buy this little toy, and,

with my usual caution, used the field paths to avoid notice and lost myself. Now, to resume."

With revolver raised at the ready, Hubert ran quickly through the closely written page, raising his eyes frequently to make sure that Bannister had made no move. Then he folded the paper and placed it carefully in his pocket. As he did so he spoke.

"This is a literary treat that can wait. There is a personal interest in it that will beat any novel ever written. I suppose you would call it a wind of happy chance that fanned this little paper to the feet of the man it so nearly concerns. You're a dangerous man, Bannister, a very dangerous man—as dangerous, perhaps, as that little rat of a black-mailer in Paris . . . ah . . ."

For Thomas Bannister had taken the chance that had offered when the other had lowered for a moment the weapon that threatened him with its ring of evil, gleaming blue steel. With a sweep of his hand he had hurled the lamp to the ground, and, gathering all his strength, had leaped upon Hubert, taking that young man unawares and comparatively unprepared. Together, enmeshed in the folds of the dressing-gown, the two men went down. Feverishly they explored for each other's throat, fighting not as men fight, fairly and squarely, but as brute beasts who know that there is no mercy in victory and that death is the portion of the vanquished.

This way and that they rolled, gasping, panting. And then, by an adroit move, the advantage came to the younger man.

Sir Hubert felt beneath his hand the quilted collar of Bannister's dressing-gown, and, guided by that, his fingers crept up to the throat. . . . Bannister's hands had loosed their hold . . . they seemed to Hubert to be groping at his back. . . . Heavily he pressed until the gasping breath in the throat beneath his hand became a death rattle, the form beneath him became limp and wilted. Harder he pressed . . . harder, using up his last ounce of strength in this final effort. Then, when Thomas Bannister lay still, Sir Hubert fell across his victim . . . spent. And towards them, towards those two enemies, stealthily there crept an unseen foe—a little trail of fire from the oil of the shattered lamp, a little fringe of fire that, fanned by the breeze from the open window, had already reached the edge of the dressing-gown worn by the late Thomas Bannister. . . .

A moment and Hubert Carlairs roused himself. He looked down into the grey face that lay but a few inches beneath his own. A glance told him that his enemy was dead and fear rather than triumph took him. From now onward he would be alone with his evil, alone he would have to face Dusker. . . .

He raised himself on to his elbow, but no further.

It was as though the dead hands of his enemy plucked at him and pulled him down into a hateful embrace. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Bannister was indeed powerless, his hands lay crooked in his death agony. . . . But Hubert, as he looked, saw something else.

Not a yard from him was a mass of flame, the edges licked at the carpet like the waves of a sea of fire. Great shadows leapt across the ceiling and to the man's nostrils there came the acrid smell of burning oil. For a moment the sight held him powerless, then, with a frantic terror, he struggled to rise. Surely the dead lips so close to his own smiled . . . or was it some ghastly shadow trick of the flames. . . . The edge of the fire was now but a foot from him, Hubert could feel the heat upon his face. . . . Why was he so powerless?

And then he remembered something that had happened during the progress of the fight. Bannister's hands had been at his back. . . . Hubert half twisted his arms and felt behind him and, as he felt, the whole hideous truth came to him. Between his shoulders was a tangled mass of cord, the silken rope of Gressier's dressing-gown that the beaten man had knotted firmly about his opponent . . . small wonder that Gressier in death had seemed to smile. . . . The flames crept nearer . . . they flushed the face of the dead man and singed the hair of the living. With fingers, useless from sheer

terror, Hubert Carlairs tore at the silken knots that bound him to a hideous death, but Gressier had done his work too well. . . . The rim of flame came nearer. . . . It caught the border of a silken rug and the thin fabric flared high. . . . A piercing shriek rent the stillness of the room, the cry of a man who looks on death. . . .

Robert Beckstaff, after he had seen the figure of Roberts swallowed up in the dark, walked swiftly towards Merlains. And as he walked he kept in view the light in the room in the west wing that he knew was occupied by the master. That light was somehow in tune with his thoughts, for it was to Gressier's room that he was going when he reached the château. The diminished glow of the lamp suggested that Gressier was resting and that the interview with Sir Hubert had not lasted long. In fact, it would seem that the master of the château had retired for the night, for suddenly the light was extinguished, and then re-lit.

A curious light, this new glow in the window of the room in the west wing, a strangely red glow, unsteady, too, as though the flames of many candles flickered in the wind. Bright it gleamed, then dull, then bright again, and ever brighter, until the full significance of it burst upon the secretary.

He leapt forward, and as he ran the gleam in the window increased. It shone now upon the creeper

that edged the window, and painted crimson the boles of the pines in the plantation. Already, Beckstaff could hear cries, and when at last he reached the terrace it was to find a group of frightened servants, gesticulating, pointing to the windows of the room in the west wing.

CHAPTER VI

THE FLAT IN THE RUE MAGDEBOURG

"REALLY, my dear Myra, you must try and pull yourself together."

The girl who had been sitting at the open window of the flat turned her head and smiled up at the tenderness that was in the voice. She reached up a hand and linked it within the arm of Nora Marsden. Together they looked down upon the teeming city beneath them.

The flat that Nora had rented during her stay in Paris was high up at the corner of the Rue Magdebourg at the spot where it joins the quay. And truly the Queen of Cities has few fairer vistas. From the window where Myra sat with Nora the girls could look down upon the noble buildings and the glowing gardens of the Trocadero, the winding Seine, the green of the Champs de Mars, spoilt perhaps a little by the soaring skeleton of the Eiffel Tower. Far below them the great heart of Paris throbbed, the hum of motors, the sirens of the boats upon the river, the roll of the traffic as it crossed the Pont d'Iena. After a few moments silence Myra spoke.

"I have been trying so hard to, as you call it, pull myself together, but it is not easy to govern oneself as one would wish. I wonder, Nora, if you have ever had a great sorrow come upon you as suddenly as mine has come upon me."

The actress turned her head and looked back into the room.

"I have had many sorrows, Myra. I told you this morning about Denis. You would call that a great sorrow, would you not, to lose the man you love and know nothing of his fate, whether he is alive or dead?"

Myra rose from her seat in the window embrasure and twined an arm about her friend's waist.

"Forgive me, dear. I did forget. I think, when one suffers, one is apt to become self-centred, to forget that others suffer too. It is sympathy that makes us that way. My uncle was all the world to me, my whole life. All my thoughts were centred upon him and his welfare, in wondering how best I could repay him for all his goodness to me since my parents died. And now to find that my idol has always had feet of clay, that he has built up his fortune upon the misfortunes of others, that every luxury he has bought for me has been filched from others. . . . I wonder, too, whether I have not been to blame, whether, after having all the blessings, it is fair to forsake him, to leave him to suffer alone. I am afraid my letter to him was cruel, I have been sitting here all the

afternoon picturing to myself how he will take it."

"Surely there is no question of blame, Myra. What could you do other than what you have done. There are many duties in this old world of ours that are unpleasant, but you know that there is but one road to take and that is the one of honour. The choice is not left to you. Your uncle has sown and he must reap. Don't you see that your leaving him may show him, as nothing else could, how detestable is the life he is leading."

There was silence for a moment.

"God grant that it may. How long will it take us to hear from Mr. Beckstaff, I wonder. I had hoped there would be a letter this morning."

Nora smiled.

"Hardly so soon as that, I fancy. I rather think that things were upside down at the château yesterday after we left. Think what a bombshell among the guests. Of course, there would be all manner of excuses to account for the absence of the mistress of the ceremonies. I wonder what story they will make up. And then there will be the strange disappearance of an actress who runs off without waiting for the really fat cheque she was to be paid. Perhaps Mr. Beckstaff will come himself rather than write."

"I asked him not to. I felt that in leaving him at Merlains I was not leaving my uncle quite alone."

The girl turned and stood gazing down again on to the crowded streets. Into her face had come a longing, a hope awakened by Nora's words. She was hoping in her heart that Robert would take no heed of her letter, but that he would come post haste to her. Already she could feel his protecting arms about her, hear his low voice murmuring its comfort into her ear. Idly she watched the whirl of movement, tears welling up in her big brown eyes. What a paradise her uncle had intended to make of this Paris during the coming winter. What a round of gaiety they had promised themselves. At the coming of the cold winds when the great Normandy plains would become grey beneath the skies of winter they had decided that they would close Merlains and move for three months into Paris. Already the house of their sojourn had been chosen and was in the hands of the decorators, a great mansion with a colonnade of Corinthian columns and a history that made every stone in the old building romantic. It was set back in its own grounds in the Avenue Gabriel with an old-world walled-in garden overlooking the trees of the Champs Elysées. How often had she sat with her uncle after dinner in the gardens at Merlains when they had lived over in their minds the glories that were to come when all the doors that guard the social fortress of Paris would open to their touch. How she had gone to bed and dreamed it all . . . and now the city would go on as ever upon its laughing

way and they two would be outcast. . . . Peris at the gates of an earthly Paradise. . . .

A startled cry brought Nora again to the window.

"What is it, Myra?"

The girl was leaning far out of the window and was pointing down to the corner of the Quai Debilly. Nora, following the direction of the pointing finger, looked also. By the pavement there was drawn up a car, a large grey-painted body and wheels that spoke of long journeying. A man was at that moment climbing stiff-jointedly down from the driving seat and glancing about him at the houses. As the girls watched him he disappeared from their view beneath the overhanging portico of the building in which was situated their flat.

"Oh, Nora, it's Robert. You were just saying he might come."

"Of course he might come you little goose. . . . Why, what's the matter?"

For Myra Mannering had clutched at the window draperies and was swaying as though she would faint. She passed a hand across her forehead and smiled a wan little smile.

"I'm all right, dear. . . . I wonder what we are going to hear. I'm afraid . . . afraid of what Robert has come here to tell us. . . ."

There came a ring at the outer door of the flat, and the two girls listened breathlessly as Nora's maid opened it. There was a hurried step in the

hall and then Robert Beckstaff was in the room. His face was grave as he greeted the two girls.

"Please sit down, Miss Marsden, and you, too, Myra. I have some news for you that will, I am afraid, shock you. But perhaps you have seen the papers?"

Nora Marsden shook her head and pointed towards a table upon which lay a copy of the *Presse*, still unopened.

"I am afraid that we have had far too much to think about. Besides, we did not dream that anything that has occurred at Merlains would find its way into the papers, at least, not yet."

Robert Beckstaff drew off his leather driving gloves and placed them, together with his dust coat, upon a chair.

"I am not the bearer of good news, I am sorry to say," he went on, "and yet I am glad that you are going to hear what there is to hear from my lips rather than from a journalist's report. Miss Mannering, I have to tell you first of all that Monsieur Gressier is dead."

Myra looked for a moment into the eyes of the speaker. There was no weakness in her now. Her face paled a little, but her voice, when she spoke, had no tremor.

"My uncle did not . . . ?"

"No, Myra, thank God it was not that. There had been a discussion, the servants tell me, between your uncle and Sir Hubert Carlairs and I imagine

that they fought. There is nothing to tell how the thing happened because they are both beyond the telling. They died together and their bodies were lying together when the fire ——"

"There was a fire?"

"Did I not tell you? Yes, there was a fire, one of the biggest that has ever taken place in Normandy, I should think. The château is but a heap of blackened ruins. There is not a stick saved so far as I can make out. You know the storm that came up last evening, you had an echo of it here in Paris, I believe. It was very wild out there in the open country to the north and the flames were fanned into a furnace and the old place blazed away like tinder. There is only a small brigade, as you know, at Louviers, and even that arrived too late to be of any use, except in the saving of one wing and the stables."

Beckstaff paused and lit a cigarette. He was finding it rather difficult to tell his story without showing in his manner the vague relief he felt that things had been taken out of their hands. He knew, and he felt that his hearers knew, that all had happened for the best and that both Bannister and Carlairs were better dead than left alive to face the eternal disgrace that could not fail to be attached to their names. He had found it hard too, to speak of what he had seen at the château and keep back things that Myra, for her peace of mind, must never know. The room in which the fire had started was,

it was true, burnt entirely out, but there had been enough left for Beckstaff to piece together in a manner, what had taken place. The bodies had been suspiciously near together and the charred silken knots at the back of Sir Hubert had mystified him until he had, to his own satisfaction, reconstructed the scene. Left alone with the dead men he had separated them and destroyed for all time the evidence that might have raised questions in the mind of the jury that in due course would pronounce judgment upon the affair. This he had taken into his own hands—the men were dead and it mattered to no one the manner of their death. To find them knotted together with the strands of charred rope would have served but to confuse the issues and could not fail to bring pain to the girl he loved.

Myra had risen as Beckstaff had stopped speaking and was now standing at her old position by the window. The sunlight shone upon a face that was strangely peaceful. . . . almost triumphant.

"I am thanking God that this has happened," she said. "You know, of course, by what I wrote to you, Robert, that my uncle was—was not an honourable man. Now, all that has been cleansed away by the fire, and his account with man is settled. It is now between him and his Maker—and may God have mercy on him. Oh, I am glad to think that he is free, that the law and the scorn of his fellow-men is not for him. When I left him I had visions

of all the awful things that come in the wake of crime. They have kept me awake all night. I saw the man who had loved me standing in the dock of a felon. I saw him, he who was always so fond of the sunlight, pining away his life in the darkness of a prison cell." She turned and faced Nora and Robert. "Oh, I do hope you see the way I am thinking; I do hope that you do not think me heartless to speak like this . . . you understand me, don't you, Nora . . . don't you, Robert?"

"I quite understand, Myra . . . and I am sure that Miss Marsden understands, too."

Nora crossed the room to the girl and placed her arms about the drooping figure. It was her answer.

"I think that it will be as well if you leave all the details," the man went on, "the inevitable details, to me. There will be many unpleasant duties to be seen to, and I will trouble you as little as possible. And now, there is other work to be done."

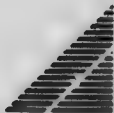
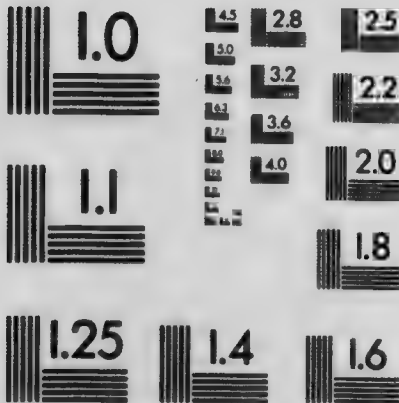
"Other work?"

"Yes, listen. In the fraud that has been perpetrated—you will excuse me, Myra, if I call things by their right names—there has been more than at first meets the eye. The only thing that the fire did not consume was the small safe in your uncle's room. Of this I had a duplicate key. The whole affair was there in memoranda and letters that it was not a difficult matter to piece together. They



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were in a secret drawer which I burst open; I wanted to know all there was to know before the police took a hand.

"It appears that the conspiracy to claim the Gressier estates was entered into some time ago. Sir Hubert Carlairs was, perhaps, the prime mover in it. At any rate, Mr. Bannister was not the only one to blame. There was another Carlairs, but Denis took no . . . I beg your pardon, Miss Marsden?"

The girl quickly recovered herself.

"It's nothing. I knew Denis. . . Have you any news of him?"

"Denis Carlairs disappeared. It was by the merest chance that I found out what had become of him. The morning that you left Merlains, your uncle had a letter that distressed him very much. It was from a man who was trying to blackmail him—a man who knew that Denis was being kept in hiding so that he should not divulge what he knew of the affair. Also Denis was useful in another way so long as he kept silence. While he was in hiding it was not likely that the police would look more deeply into the death of Sir Hector Carlairs. Sir Hector was killed by Hubert. It appears that Bannister, before he claimed the chest in the Carlairs vault, visited Hubert at the Towers. They were surprised in the grounds by Sir Hector, and Hubert was faced with a dilemma. If he introduced Bannister, his father would know that the man who

was to present himself in a few days at the bank as Armand Gressier was a fraud. The whole thing appeared to him in a flash, and he struck at the old man, hoping that he would only stun him and that he would have no time in the darkness to take note of the personal appearance either of Bannister or himself. He struck harder than he knew and Sir Hector fell like a stone. It was after this that he decided to make it appear that Denis was the culprit. By some means he managed to induce his foster-brother to leave the house and to cross to France. Once at Havre, where he was told money awaited him, he was kidnapped, and has been kept a prisoner ever since at a house . . ."

"But how did you find out all this?"

"Partly from the papers in the safe, and partly from the servant of Sir Hubert—Roberts."

"Roberts. That is the dark man who was at Merlains with Sir Hubert?"

"Yes."

Myra sat for a moment without speaking, then—

"It was not the first time that I had seen him. He came once to the flat where I lived with my uncle in the Rue Richelieu. And he told you all this?"

"He told me only when he saw that I had him in my power. He, it seems, was in league with the man who was trying to blackmail Mr. Bannister. I kept the appointment with this fellow because your uncle was not well enough to go himself and

he was afraid to ignore the man's warning. It was after I had left this man that I saw Roberts in conversation with him. I improved the shining hour, that's all. If I had known what I know now I would have gained more than I did. I had not seen the papers in the safe then."

Nora Marsden leant forward.

"Perhaps Myra has told you what this means to me. You say that you know where Denis is?"

"Yes, Miss Marsden, I learnt about Denis also from Sir Hubert's servant, who would appear to be the sinister figure behind a great deal of all this trouble. Denis was in his foster-brother's way and evidently it was considered necessary to remove him."

"He is not . . ."

"No, Miss Marsden, he is not dead. The scoundrels who acted for Sir Hubert drew the line at murder. Denis is being held a prisoner here in Paris."

"In Paris?"

Robert Beckstaff smiled.

"I am afraid, Myra, that Paris is not as fair a place as you see it from these windows. The city is full of rookeries, dens where a man may lie hidden for years. Denis is at Menilmontant in a *passage* off the Rue des Amandiers. Don't start up like that, Miss Marsden, we are doing all we can and the rescue of Mr. Denis Carlaire is not a job for a summer afternoon. The house is being watched by a private

inquiry agent I have engaged and we're only waiting for night."

"You have told the police?"

"No. I think it better for all concerned if we can get the unfortunate man out without their help. Publicity will serve no useful purpose. The men who are acting with me are to be trusted. . . . You will remain here and I will bring you any news there may be."

"And we are not to be with you?"

"I would rather you did not come—and yet I don't see why you should not if you promise to do exactly as you are told. In fact, you may be useful if you remain in the car while my friends and I do the work."

Robert Beckstaff rose to his feet.

"There is a good deal for me to do. I shall be kept busy and I want you to promise me that you will not leave the flat until I call for you. It is dark a little after nine. I'll be here about half-past."

The two girls watched from the window until Beckstaff's car had disappeared among the traffic of the Quai Debilly. Then they sat long at the window, sat until the first faint violet shadows of the dusk came down upon the city. They had much to talk about: the fire at Merlains, the deaths of the chief conspirators in the plot, the safety of Denis and his coming liberation.

"Did Mr. . . . did your uncle ever tell you anything of the history of the necklace, Myra?"

"Only once, the day he sent into the bankers in Paris for it. He told me it was historical and promised me the whole history some day."

'Then you don't know to whom it belonged?'

Myra shook her head and her friend went on.

"To a very flighty little lady, Myra: no less a person than Jeanne du Barry, the girl who climbed from the gutter to be almost Queen of France."

"It seems to bring misfortune with it, does it not?"

"I thought so the first night I saw it, that New Year's Eve I told you about this afternoon. I have only to close my eyes to picture it all again, the cold green walls of the vault and Denis putting the necklace round my neck. How he laughed at me when I shivered and told him I was afraid. It was as though some one was walking over my grave, Myra, and I thought afterwards, when he told me the history, of how the steel of the guillotine was cold. . . . I think I have read all there is to read on the subject since. Madame du Barry was living here just outside Paris at Marly, where there are now the great waterworks. She disappeared after the fall of the Tuileries and it is evident that she sent her jewels to London for safety. Her messenger was a young aristocrat of the name of Gressier—it is curious when I was engaged to recite at Merlains that I did not recognize the name."

Slowly there fell over Paris the fairy veil of a

perfect summer twilight. The buildings across the river grew faint to the sight, and, here and there, little ochre lights appeared. Myra closed the window. . . .

At ten o'clock that night a big grey car might have been noticed purring along the Rue de Rivoli. In it were two men and two women and there was nothing in the appearance of the car or its inmates to suggest anything more important than a theatre party. Beckstaff himself was at the wheel and beside him sat the private inquiry agent whose men were even now watching the house at Menilmontant. In the covered tonneau Myra and Nora sat close together, their minds busy with the adventure before them.

On down the wide straight road, past the hotels and the railings of the Louvre, then into the Rue Antoine and across the Place de la Bastille. Now they were in a more sordid part of the city climbing the Rue de la Roquette past the grim prison and swinging on to the rough cobbles of the Boulevard Menilmontant. Here, skirting Père La Chaise, the car swung into the Avenue Gambetta and drew up at a dark spot beneath the tall wall of the cemetery. And as the car came to a standstill, three men detached themselves from the shadows of the wall and silently greeted their chief. Their report was short, merely that since noon four men had left the house in the Passage Fremaire which according to

their calculations left but a man and a woman within to be accounted for.

And now, all being in readiness for the enterprise, Beckstaff turned to the girls. Pointing outside the dense shadows in which the car stood with its lights switched off he indicated a dark entry in the opposite wall, a narrow passage between two houses. They were to keep quiet, no one could possibly see the dark grey car in the position it had taken up and there was nothing to fear.

Silently, like shadows, the other four men ran lightly across the Avenue and, separating at the dark entry, two disappeared within it, the others turning the corner and taking the Rue des Amandiers. These two, Beckstaff and the inquiry agent who had ridden beside him in the car, we will elect to follow.

The first three houses in the Rue des Amandiers have at their rears small walled-in yards which communicate with the Passage Fremaire by means of wooden doors. They are not large houses, neither are they mean. One would imagine them to be inhabited by the better class of clerk or tradesman. In each case a small paved courtyard is provided with a close grilled gateway. It is with the second of these houses that Robert Beckstaff and his companion have business upon this summer evening.

As the two men pause in the shadow of the gateway and look across the courtyard through the grill they see a building of two stories and a base-

ment. In no window is there a light and, but for a cat strolling across the paved court, there is no sign of life. Beckstaff's companion takes from his pocket an electric torch and by means of its tiny ray proceeds to pick the lock of the gate with a skill that might well be envied by the most expert of cracksmen. Follows the creak of rusty hinges, and the men, keeping to the shadows, make their way to the few steps that lead to the front door. Here again the skill of the invisible agent is brought into play and a few moments later the two men are standing within the house the door left ajar as a means of escape, were such an escape to become necessary.

Here the rays from the gas lamp over the doorway pierced the fanlight so faintly as to barely show each man the position of his companion, and they were forced to the further use of the electric torch. By its thin beam of light Beckstaff led the way down a narrow hall-way to the foot of the stairs. Here he paused to listen and the two men could hear from the basement the murmur of voices. Robert took from his pocket an automatic and, signing to his companion, made his way carefully to where a gap in the pannelling of the hall denoted the position of a second flight of stairs, leading downwards.

They had not been heard for, reaching the lower hall, they could still hear the low voices and a clatter of plates and they noticed now that the sounds came from a room upon their left, the door of which

stood slightly ajar. And then the voices ceased and there was the sound of some one moving a chair across the room . . . the click of a bolt.

Beckstaff waited for perhaps three minutes, then he leant cautiously forward. Through the aperture of the door he was able to see that the room had now but one occupant, an old woman who was seated at a wooden table reading a newspaper by the light of a single candle. Of her late companion he could see nothing and so far as he could make out there was but the one door to the room. And then from behind a slab that proved to be the cover of a trap door there emerged the head of a man—a man who the watcher had fondly thought to be safe in London.

Roberts ascended slowly from the cellar to which the trap door clearly led. In one hand he carried an empty plate and in the other a candle that he blew out as he emerged into the light of the room. It was while the man was upon his knees drawing a corner of linoleum over the trap door which he had closed that Beckstaff decided to make his move. The man Roberts turned to find himself gazing into a rim of cold steel held by Beckstaff while the old woman was receiving the attentions of a man whom Sir Hubert's late servant did not remember to have seen before, the attentions in question consisting of the binding of the ancient Mother Laplace to the chair upon which she had been sitting.

"And so I do not get my letter from London in the morning, Roberts, eh?"

The man creased his lips into a smile. The fingers of his hands, which he had held high above his head at the first sight of the pistol, twitched curiously. He rose slowly to his feet.

"You'll get the letter all right, Mr. Beckstaff, if you call for it at Cook's as you said."

"I see. A deputy acting for Mr. Roberts while that estimable gentleman is buttering his bread on both sides."

The man bowed ironically.

"At the end of a game, sir, it's always best to get away with all one can lay one's hands upon. Your offer to induce me to go to London was not very generous."

"And you thought our friend in the cellar would make you a better offer?"

"Our friend in the cellar *has* made me a better offer. Mr. Denis Carlairs, sir, is a gentleman. . . You wish to see him?"

Beckstaff turned to his companion, the request that he should attend to the trap door half formed upon his lips. The momentary lowering of the automatic was what Roberts had been playing for, and although the chance was a slender one it was the only one, and it succeeded. With a rapid side-spring he charged Beckstaff and, before the man could recover, had attacked the inquiry agent. It

was all the work of a moment, a swift blow upon the point of the jaw, the overturning of the table on which stood the candle . . . darkness and the sound of a slammed door and the shooting of a bolt . . . a door farther away was opened and shut. . . .

The women in the car had waited silently in the darkness, their eyes fixed upon the wall at the entrance of the *passage*. A clock over on the Boulevard struck the half-hour, the sounds echoing dismally over the wide stretch of the cemetery. . . . Barely had they died away than a slight movement caused them to lean forward, a rustling behind the wall across the Avenue Gambetta. . . .

They looked fixedly at the mouth of the passage, but the sounds seemed to come from behind the portion of the wall to the left. Suddenly, above the coping, there appeared the head and shoulders of a man—dimly he showed in the pale light of the stars. For a moment he hung there upon the coping looking back, then heaved himself astride the wall, and after another glance, this time up and down the length of road, he slid down. From the darkness where the car remained hidden the girls were able to see the nervous actions of the man, who, after a moment's pause in the shadows of the wall, crept cautiously out into the pale white ribbon that was the road. A moment again, while he looked anxiously about him as though he feared a decision that would commit him to one direction rather than to another,

he set off at a good pace towards the left, towards the Boulevard Menilmontant.

At the first sight of the man above the wall the two girls had, obeying orders previously given to them by Beckstaff, crouched down in the body of the car, allowing only a crevice in the half-opened door through which to peep, and it was not until the man's footsteps had ceased to ring out upon the road that they raised themselves. The stars picked out two faces, blanched and troubled.

"What ought we to do, Nora? Do you think that. . . ."

"There is nothing for us to do, dear, but to keep quiet. That was a stranger—one of the enemy. I think that points to our men being the victors."

Further speech was needless for, at that moment, steps were again heard and this time they came from the *passage* and were accompanied by the whistle that Beckstaff had agreed to give to tell the waiting girls that all was well. A moment later two men appeared at the opening, supporting between them the half-stumbling figure of another man. Again the whistle sounded and, acting upon instructions, Nora leant over the driving seat and switched on the knob of the electric headlamps. Their beams cut clear paths into the night, searching out the shadows and showing clearly the entrance to the *passage*.

And then, with a whispered cry, Nora leapt from

the car and ran across the road to the little group. One glance had told her that here was the man for whom she had been waiting and watching since that never-to-be-forgotten night when, upon Hampstead Heath, Denis and she had become all in all to each other. Their dream had been a short one, and had been rudely shattered by the letter that reached her a few hours later. And now it was all over, all the turmoil of soul, all the waiting hours. Beckstaff and the man on the other side of Denis halted, and in a moment Nora's arms were about her lover's neck.

For a moment they stood there, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot." And then Beckstaff whispered a word, and Myra, who had followed her friend from the car, put her arms lightly on Nora's shoulders.

"Come darling, we are going back to the flat—all of us."

Nora suffered herself to be led to the car, and Denis, with a little assistance, was helped up to the place beside her. Beckstaff passed a word to his assistant, and then, cranking up the engine, he climbed into the driving seat by Myra. Backing the car, he turned and, a moment later, the walls of the cemetery were whirling past them as the great car purred its way back to the Rue Magdebourg.

"Who was the man who got away, Robert?"

The driver turned to Myra.

"Then you saw him—which way did he go?"

" This way—the way we are going. Are you following him? "

" Hardly, my dear Myra. In fact, this adventure has gone far enough. We have got Denis out safely—and Merlains and all its guilty secrets are burnt and dead. Why should we worry with the small fry of the affair? "

" But who was it? "

" The gentleman you saw ' climb over the garden wall,' as the old song has it, was our estimable friend Mr. Roberts. I do not think Mr. Roberts will have much more to say. In fact, I imagine that he was more than glad to get away with a whole skin. See if they are all right at the back, Myra."

The girl turned and glanced into the tonneau. As she looked a smile came into her eyes. She pressed closer to Robert Beckstaff's shoulder and smiled again.

" They're all right at the back, Robert," she whispered.

The car had entered the city, and was now pulsing smoothly along the level stretch of the Rue de Rivoli.

And if the four young people who alighted at the door of the flat in the Rue Magdebourg had been blessed with a vision beyond that of mere mortals they would have known that so far from Roberts being one of the smaller fry of the affair, the man had suddenly assumed an importance that he—and they—would willingly have evaded.

They would have seen a hunted man scale the wall of Père La Chaise followed by a watchful gendarme. They would have heard the shrill blast of a whistle and would have witnessed a man hunt among the tombs and alley-ways of the great cemetery—a man hunt that had its final scene in the Préfecture in the Rue de la Roquette.

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH the case was dealt with by the French courts, the English newspapers, in fact the newspapers of the world, gave much space to the sensational confession and death of the man Roberts who committed suicide in the police-van as he was being conveyed to the Palais de Justice upon what was expected to be the closing day of his trial. For days the evidence had been closing round him and it must have been despair at ever finding a way through the meshes of the net of the law that determined the accused man to write his confession and take the matter of his punishment into his own hands.

Perhaps of all the journals the *Echo de Paris* gave the best account of the tragic occurrence. Translated, it reads :—

“ The sensational death yesterday morning of the man who for the last few days has been on his trial charged with the shooting of Charles Dusker who was found dead in an upper room of a house in the Rue des Amandiers, is a fitting end for one

who for many years has been criminally active in the principal capitals of Europe, more especially Paris and London. The man who was shot, Dusker, will be remembered as the forger who engineered the gigantic frauds upon the *Crédit Bourdon* in the 'nineties, a crime for which he served seven years on Devil's Island. From inquiries we have made, it is evident that a partnership existed even at that time between Dusker and the man who took his life and, yesterday, his own. Roberts himself, it would appear, was not known to the Paris police until that night when his sensational capture among the tombs of Père La Chaise brought him into notoriety. Little did the gendarme who scaled the wall after one who was to him nothing but a suspicious character think that he was running down one of the city's most desperate criminals.

"It must awaken in the minds of peaceful Parisians a certain feeling of insecurity. The house in the Rue des Armandiers"—of which, by the way, the *Echo* gives an excellent sketch—"trim, well-kept, outwardly respectable and above reproach—who was to think that behind its dainty blinds and glowing window-boxes crime had its being? And yet, within its walls an English gentleman had lain hidden for months, the adopted son of a man whose name had been as well known in financial circles here in Paris as in London. Small wonder if all Paris is anxiously peering over its garden wall wondering whether the next-door neighbour who

goes so regularly to town is really all he makes himself out to be, and whether Madame X. has not a more sinister object in view than the innocent seeming shopping expeditions with which she deludes the neighbourhood. Small wonder if they lie awake of nights listening for the silence to be shattered by the pistol shot of the assassin.

"The public will have learned from the evidence of the last few days the nature of the story that has been unfolded, a story that is surely stranger far than any fiction ever penned. The tragedy at the Rue des Armandiers was the outcome of a quarrel between two criminals who had been for years in partnership. Such quarrels are by no means rare in the annals of crime; in fact, statistics go to prove that the only successful wrong-doer is the man who works alone. To him there is but the one enemy—the law—an enemy against which it is best from his point of view to fight single-handed.

"The three prime movers in the conspiracy that gave the historic Château Merlains into the hands of an adventurer have passed beyond human punishment, leaving a world aghast that such a thing could happen in this twentieth century, in days when the path of the evildoer is so beset by the nets of the police.

"It is with a certain relief that one leaves the body of the man Roberts in the Morgue and the blackened remains of Sir Hubert Carlairs and his accomplice Thomas Bannister beneath the ruins of

the Château Merlains, and turns for a moment to the romance that lurks behind all the sordid facts of this amazing case. It is a relief to think of the chest of the Gressiers, that old, worm-eaten receptacle of secrets and treasure that had hidden beneath the pavement of Whitehall the glories that in the long ago belonged to Versailles. The thought is full of pictures.

"One has but to look back into the well of time, to those far-off days when the *Patrie* was in the melting pot of history. It is not a difficult matter to reconstruct the high adventure upon which young Gressier set out. In a period so full of courage and devotion to cause, this young aristocrat stands out a shining example, and it is with regret that we must come to the conclusion that the family that bore that illustrious name is extinct. One would like to think that young Jules Gressier escaped the perils of the times in which he lived, but it is beyond doubt that he met his death. Whether, after delivering the jewels to Carlair's Bank, he returned to France is doubtful, a man of his calibre could hardly fail to leave his mark upon the times. In the records of the guillotins he has no place, although a change of name is not inconsistent with the period of stress in which he lived. More probable, by far, that Gressier came to his end in England or on his journey back to his native land. When one considers the strict watch kept upon our coasts, one can understand the risk of such a

journey to one who had fought with the *Petits Pères* in their defence of royalty.

"And so we can leave Jules Gressier knowing wherever he lies that he sleeps soundly. We raise our hats to his memory with perhaps a shade of envy that we, too, had not lived in stirring times. And yet romance is yesterday and to-morrow, never to-day—and perhaps those good old days of adventure fall short of what we paint them to be. Gressier played his part and the years have marched onward towards that criminal adventure whose final chapter is written in the blood of four malefactors."

Nora Marsden read the article in the *Echo de Paris* sitting on one of the stone benches in the grounds of the Villa Fleutiers at Monte Carlo. Denis had given such evidence as had been demanded of him through his solicitor, and by his doctor's orders he was recuperating in the sunshine of the Côte d'Azur. A friend of Nora's had invited the party to spend a few weeks at the Fleutiers, and in the genial air and the happiness of Nora's presence Denis was fast recovering the health that had been so severely shattered by his enforced residence at the house in Menilmontant. Myra Mannering and Robert Beckstaff completed the party, and kind old Madame Renier was living again in the youth of her guests. It was so pleasant to have fresh young voices about the gardens and

light footsteps upon the stairs. The old lady looked up as Nora put the paper upon the seat beside her.

"You have been reading that horrid case, Nora—I see it in your face. Did we not agree to let the thing be forgotten?—never to be spoken of?"

Nora smiled sadly.

"I think we did, Madame Renier, but. . . ."

The old lady placed an arm about the shoulders of the girl.

"I know, dear. It is so tempting when one is in the sunshine to look back into the shadows. The sun shines all the brighter, does it not, by the comparison?"

"The sun could not shine brighter for me, Madame Renier. Do you know, Denis walked the whole length of the Promenade des Anglais this morning."

"And is sleeping it off now. He must not over-tire himself."

"Oh, we are very careful. We want. . . ."

"Want what, dear?"

"It sounds unkind to say it Madame Renier—you have been so kind."

"You want to leave me?"

"We want to get back to London and settle down. Denis is an important person now, and he will have full charge of the bank. Robert is to help him. We are going to take a house at Richmond, and I'm going to give up the stage and live the life of a banker's wife—stately dinners and eternal rubbers

of whist and all that, I suppose. Ah, here's Myra."

From a turning in the shrubbery Myra Mannering came walking. For all the happiness that shone in her eyes one could plainly see that she had come lately through some great trouble. The rounded cheeks had lost a little of their colour, and the girl walked slowly, as though in thought. Her eyes fell upon the two women on the bench, and she hurried to them.

"Where's Denis?" she asked.

Nora looked a little guilty.

"Madame Renier will have it that I have been overtaxing his strength in letting him walk too far. Do you think it has hurt him?"

Myra smiled.

"I don't think anything would hurt Denis if it were prescribed by his nurse."

Madame Renier rose with a shake of her silken petticoats.

"If you people are going to talk nonsense I think I will go and find Denis. His chair is full in the sun, and perhaps. . . ."

Left alone with Nora, Myra sank upon the bench by her side.

"I suppose our dreadful case is ended now, Nora. What does the paper say?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing that we did not already know. You are happy, Myra?"

"Yes, dear, very happy. Happiest perhaps in

thinking that my—that my uncle is free from the tortures of his crime. I try always to think that what he did was done for love of me. He could not have lived in prison knowing that, so long as he lived, his crime would live also. All his misdeeds are buried now in the ruins of Merlains."

"And so we will always think of him, Myra—as a man who has paid the price—who has settled his account with man. I have been telling Madame Renier that we are going back to London."

Myra sat for a little while looking out over the deep blue of the Mediterranean dotted with its gleaming white yachts and little brown-sailed fishing boats.

"London. How strange it will seem—this new life into which we are both entering. I don't know London very well, Nora. I stayed there once in a little flat in Bayswater—uncle and I were very poor then."

"But I do. I know London inside out. Oh, I'll soon show you round, dear—that is, if a banker's wife is allowed any liberty at all. What staid old sticks we are going to become, Myra."

"The happiest life is the quietest one, dear. There is so much given to us to enjoy—the sun and the flowers and the happiness in the faces round us. I wonder, Nora, what became of the necklace?"

"You left it at Merlains?"

"Yes, with all my other jewellery. I expect it will be found when the ruins are cleared away."

And then it will be put back in that vault to wait for a Gressier to come along to let it out again. I wonder if there are any Gressiers left? "

" Madame Renier's notary is making inquiries. He is in Paris poking his nose into all sorts of archives."

" And if they should all be dead? "

" Then the contents of the chest may be sold by arrangement, I understand. A certain percentage will go to the French Government, and the rest. . . ."

" The rest? "

" The rest will be a fortune, Myra. Think what you can do with it—oh, I'm sorry, dear, of course, you won't want to touch it."

" Oh, but I will. If it is big enough I will buy the ground upon which Merlains stood, and I am going to build a house—a house of refuge where souls that have lost their way in this world may find it again. They, these wandering ones, will be looked after by good women and brought back to the path. Won't that be splendid, Nora? Ah, here come the men."

Robert Beckstaff and Denis rounded the corner of the villa. There was little in the appearance of the latter to remind one of the care-free boy who saw the New Year in at Covent Garden Ball. The eyes, for all that they retained their youthfulness, were deep-sunken, and the hair had greyed a little above the temples. The men came towards

the girls, and Denis sank down into the wicker chair Nora pushed forward for him.

"I've just been telling Robert that the sooner I get back into harness the better. Really, I don't know why all you good people are in conspiracy against me. I'm fit as a fiddle and old Doctor Lemaine up at Nice is a fraud. Have you spoken to Madame Renier, Nora?"

"Yes. She quite understands."

"Well, I've got an idea. I suppose invalids with one foot in the grave are allowed ideas. Why not take the good lady back with us. She has a host of friends in London, and I'm thinking she could trot you round a bit while Robert and I are settling down in Whitehall. After that. . . ."

"Yes. And what after that, Denis?"

Denis reached up a hand and rested it upon Nora's arm.

"After that, dear, there's going to be a double wedding. We won't patronize one of the fashionable churches, if you don't mind, but some dear little old church in the country. You see, just now we are rather notable people, and a little rest and quiet will do us all the world of good. Eh, Robert?"

Beckstaff threw his cigarette over the balustrade of the terrace. He looked at Myra.

"Suit us, eh Myra? I had a letter from my mother this morning, she is dying to meet you all. Ours is a little village in Cornwall, perched up on the edge of the Atlantic and I think our church

will fit the bill. My uncle is the Vicar and the dearest old man in the world. Come, Myra, I want you to read what the old lady says and help me to answer it."

Nora and Denis watched them as they passed from the terrace through the French window into the library.

"What a sport Robert is, Nora. I wonder if we will ever be thankful and grateful enough for what he did for me. You can have no idea of the agony I went through the last few months of my captivity. A little cellar with a window about as big as a handkerchief, and each day thinking that the scoundrels upstairs would get sick of keeping me alive. The house, as you know, was close to the cemetery of Père La Chaise and I suppose that is what made it so silent. Hardly a sound ever reached me and I used to lie there and think and think. . . ."

Nora bent low and kissed the thin cheek.

"But dearest, we're not going to think of those horrid things any more. There's a new life opening for all of us. I was only thinking this morning, when I pulled the curtains from my window, how good that life was going to be. It was the dawn that made me think that—such a wonderful dawn, Denis, all glory and promise."

The man drew Nora's head down until her lips rested on his. Madame Renier, who appeared at the window to tell her guests that the dressing-

bell had rung, drew back into the shadow of the library leaving her message undelivered.

There had been times in Madame Renier's life when such things as dressing-bells and dinners had seemed to her very unimportant indeed. And Madame Renier was one of the few middle-aged ladies who do not forget the April of their lives.

THE END

